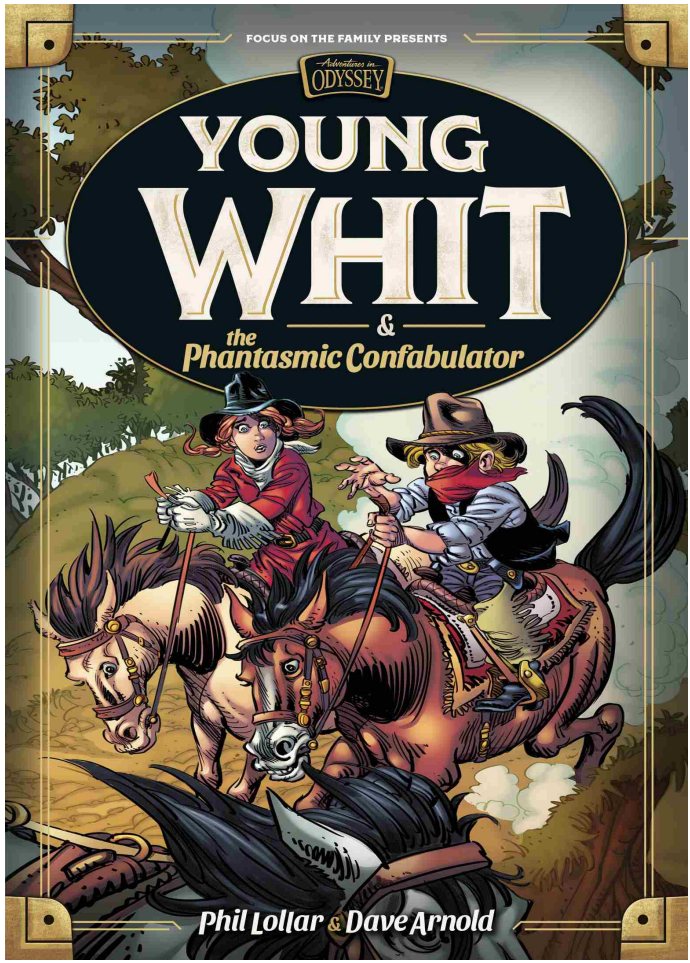
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YOUNG WHIT
&
the Phantasmic Confabulator
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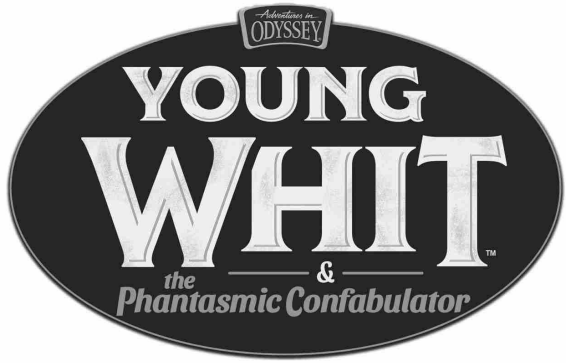

Phil Lollar & Dave Arnold

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Young Whit and the Phantasmic Confabulator

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For Leslie.
I can't imagine life
without you.
—Phil

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Prologue

Here we go again, he thought.

Flying.

Floating.

Drifting.

The old familiar pattern.

Falling.

The horrid sound.

His mother's screams.

Pain.

He knew it was a dream—the dream. It had disappeared for a while. But it was back now. Every night.

The pleasant smell.

The lovely sound.

The gentle touch.

The sweet taste.

The soothing light.

Warm.

Safe.

Secure.

Forever at peace.

He knew where it was going. In the past, he'd try to stop it

there—he *wanted* it to stop. But not now. Now he wanted it to continue.

Sickness.

Medicine.

Whispers.

Separation.

Grandfather grim.

Father's anguish.

Mother's weak smile.

Door closing.

Wail of grief.

Black coffin.

Mother lifeless.

This was where he used to wake up, startled, shaking, sweating. But something had changed. The pattern had altered—no, not altered. Expanded.

An icy cold river.

A deep plunge.

His father's smile.

Friends laughing and clapping.

Fiona beaming.

And among them all, a new Face. One he didn't know, yet it was completely familiar somehow. And he knew that Face was why he didn't want the dream to end. Why he actually wanted it to go on forever.

And why he knew that one day, it would.

Chapter One

The robe of Jesus Christ?

Ten-year-old John Avery Whittaker shook his head every time he thought about it. In an old, scarred, wooden trunk, in his upstairs bedroom at the end of Magnolia Lane in Provenance, North Carolina, he actually had a piece of the robe of Jesus! *How can it be possible?*

He knew from the beginning that the cloth wasn't normal. After all, he had used it to wrap his dog, McDuff, after accidentally stabbing the pooch with a sword in the woods behind his house last October. He had gone back to the house to get medicine and bandages, and when he'd returned, McDuff was completely healed, the cloth folded neatly on a nearby fallen log. And when he examined it, the cloth, which should have been saturated with blood, was spotless!

Same with his friend Ben Huck last November. Ben's father, Clarence, had accidentally shot him at the moonshine liquor still behind Granville Manor. Ben was bleeding profusely when Johnny and his neighbor Emmy Capello got to him. But a few moments after Johnny used the cloth to staunch the flow of blood, Ben sat up, groggy, but without a mark on him! And later, when Johnny examined the cloth, it

was, again, spotless!

Unfortunately, Johnny wasn't the only one who saw what happened to Ben. Karl Mangle, the owner of the moonshine still and the father of his friends Steve and Paul, all but demanded that Johnny give him the cloth around Christmastime last year in order to heal Steve. Afflicted with muscular dystrophy, Steve took a turn for the worse at yuletide and wound up in the hospital. *Or, rather,* back *in the hospital,* Johnny thought, *and no word yet on when he might come home.*

Oddly enough, it was a visit to Steve during his prior hospital stay after Halloween that made Johnny doubt whether the cloth had any power at all. He visited Steve's room to heal him with it, but it didn't work. Steve thought it was a grand joke, and Johnny pretended the same, but Paul was not happy about it. "And he still isn't," Johnny muttered to himself. Paul had been decidedly cool toward him ever since.

And then Johnny became really confused when his stepmother, Fiona, refused to be healed by the cloth after being blinded in a horseback riding accident. But though he couldn't understand it (*and still don't, to be honest*, he thought), it was Fiona's remarkable contentment at her lot, her amazing ability to say, "It is well with my soul," that led Johnny to make the best decision he had ever made: giving his life to Jesus Christ.

And now, I have an actual piece of His robe in my trunk!

At least, that was the conclusion that his father's associates examining Grandpa Jackson's journal came to.

The journal was another incredible discovery from that vaunted trunk. Written in several ancient languages (most of them forgotten) by quite a few people (most of them also forgotten), the journal apparently catalogued more about the history of the cloth than even Johnny's father, Harold, the consummate scholar, had been able to discover. "And that's saying something!" Johnny muttered aloud. While his father's research had been useful, important, and even entertaining, it hadn't uncovered anything remotely as momentous as this! He

wondered what other revelations the journal had in store—and more importantly, when he'd get it back.

The Lord and Savior Jesus Christ! The Son of God! Creator of the universe! And I have a piece of His robe!

Johnny suddenly shivered with an overwhelming sense of responsibility. Somehow this cloth had come into his possession. He wasn't sure why or even how, just that it had. He shuddered to think of how many times he almost lost it in the past few months. He would have to be more vigilant from now on. People will stop at nothing to get this cloth! *I need to be more alert, more watchful, more aware of what's going on around m—*

WHAM!

Something smashed into the left side of Johnny's face—something hard and fast. He saw stars and blanked out for a moment. The next thing he knew he was on his back, looking up at a high, white, plastered ceiling through one eye, the taste of blood in the back of his throat. Ears ringing, he probed the area around his left eye gingerly. It was swelling and, along with the left side of his nose, was completely numb to the touch—for a few seconds. Then both his eye and nose burned like a raging inferno, and his head felt as if someone had buried a dull tomahawk in his skull.

The ringing faded and was replaced by what Johnny thought at first were distorted moans and muffled explosions. But these soon morphed into the more familiar sound of mocking laughter and bouncing balls—familiar because, as his senses cleared, he recognized just who was doing the laughing and bouncing.

"Strange way to catch a basketball, Whittaker—with your face!"

"This ain't soccer, Whittaker! You *can* use your hands!"

Hulking Lazlo Farnsworth and smirking Wilson Knox chortled, guffawed, and snorted in derision. *The effect was not unsimilar to a group of feeding hogs*, Johnny thought. He was aware of several other snickering students gawking at him, and he remembered why: He was in the middle of a full gym in P.E. class. He sat up slowly, and blood dripped from his left

nostril onto the wooden gym floor. And then new sounds pierced his hearing, turning the dull ache in his skull into a sharp throb: a referee's whistle and the voice of Coach Conrad, the gym teacher.

Tweeeee! "Don't bleed on my floor, Whittaker! I just had it refinished!"

Johnny pulled up the bottom of his P.E. jersey and held it to his nose in a marginally successful attempt to staunch the flow of blood. He glared up at Coach Conrad through his good eye and said tartly, "It's nod really somedink I can help, sir. And I wouldn'd be bleedink if Lazlo and Wilson hadn't pumm'ud me wif da ball!"

Lazlo and Wilson immediately donned looks of feigned innocence and were about to protest when the coach's whistle again pierced Johnny's headache.

Tweeeee! "I don't wanna hear it, Whittaker! I saw the whole thing. Farnsworth passed to Knox, Knox back to Farnsworth, and Farnsworth to you. Only you were off in la-la land!"

"Bud, sir—!"

Tweeeee! "No 'buts,' Whittaker! It was a legal pass. I've warned you about daydreaming while on the court. Maybe next time you'll remember to pay attention!"

"Yes, sir."

"Knox, Farnsworth, help him up!"

The goons started forward, but Johnny waved them off. The last thing he wanted was those two touching him. "I can do it byself." He stood on wobbly legs.

Coach Conrad examined him. "Nothing looks broken. Go to the nurse and get some ice. And stay there until your nose stops bleedin'. Then hit the showers. Can you do that by yourself too?"

"Yes, sir." Johnny thought of a tart retort, but he stifled it, in part because he knew it wouldn't do any good, and also because deep down, he knew the coach was right. He should have been paying attention and not daydreaming. He headed toward the nurse's office on jelly legs.

Behind him came another whistle blast. *Tweeeee!* "All

right, show's over! The rest of you get back to the game! Unless you wanna start running drills!"

The gym instantly sprang back to life, as did the snickers and whispers aimed at Johnny. He reached the swinging door to the locker room, but because of his eye, which was already swelling shut, he misjudged the distance and, in a scene right out of a *Three Stooges* short, ended up walking into it instead of through it. His head even made a *Kook!* sound, like Curly's did when Moe hit it with a two-by-four. More pain in his noggin; more guffaws and chortles from the crowd.

Johnny corrected his course and exited the gym, successfully this time, and one thought cut through all the pain and humiliation: *Boy, do I hate basketball.*

Chapter Two

The ice pack did its work reducing the swelling, and Johnny could soon see more clearly. Nurse Florence also managed to stop his nosebleed. She then sent Johnny back to the locker room to change and clean up. His face now sported a lovely bruise and a bit of a shiner, his nose and eye socket were sore to the touch, and he still had a dull throb behind his left eye.

The pointing, whispering, and snickering continued in the hallways and during his final class, English. Johnny wondered where Emmy was, but then he remembered that on Friday afternoons she worked in the school library. When the dismissal bell rang (a sound his headache could have done without), Johnny made his way down to the basement workroom of his friend Ben Huck, the school janitor. Ben had been awfully quiet and out of sorts lately, and Johnny thought he knew why.

Barrymore Banking and Trust.

Specifically, the alarm system they had installed in the bank before Christmas, and how it failed to prevent the biggest robbery in the town's history by one of the most notorious criminal gangs in the country, led by the vicious Alvin Karpis.

Johnny had been trying to talk with Ben about it for weeks, but Ben had avoided the subject like the plague. Even when Ben had helped Johnny clean up the records room in the town hall basement during Christmas break, the two never mentioned the bank or the alarm. Johnny had been hesitant to bring it up at the time because the robbery was his fault. He had inadvertently let slip to one of the robbers how to disarm the alarm. The result was the bank vault's being cleaned out, both of the cash and of the Confederate gold that Johnny and Emmy had found last fall. Emmy was not happy about the fiasco, either, Johnny reminded himself.

Courtesy of Mr. Underwood, the bank manager, the whole town blamed both Johnny and Ben. Johnny knew that he alone was to blame, and that none of it was Ben's fault. Ben's alarm design was solid.

As he approached Ben's workshop door, Johnny hoped to finally clear the air about the whole mess.

He knocked. "Ben?" No answer. Johnny checked the doorknob. It was unlocked. He turned it and entered. The workshop lights were on, but the room seemed deserted. "Ben?" he called. "You here?" Still no answer.

A quick inspection confirmed it was empty. Johnny sighed. "Looks like we're not gonna have that conversation today," he muttered. He headed toward the door when something on Ben's workbench caught his eye.

It was a long piece of cellophane, coated on one side with a dark, powdery substance. Johnny touched the powder, rubbed it between his index finger and thumb, and sniffed it. He nodded knowingly. "Iron oxide." There were also small metal cubes, each with one curved surface the same width as the cellulose strip, about a quarter of an inch. Johnny put the curved surface of the cube close to the loose iron oxide powder on the desk, and the powder snapped to it. "You're magnetic," Johnny said to the cube.

A memory suddenly popped into his head. He had read about this in one of the technical journals Ben had loaned him. Some German scientists had successfully experimented with this sort of thing a few years back. Ben was building a

recording machine that used iron-oxide-coated cellulose tape instead of wax cylinders.

"Brilliant!" Johnny exclaimed with a smile—and immediately winced in pain. The smile had flared up his still-bruised left cheekbone and eye socket. His headache roared awake again, and he picked up his bookbag and left the workshop.

When he reached the top of the stairs, he met with a surprise. In the main hallway, several girls were busy hanging banners and streamers advertising the upcoming Saint Valentine's Day dance. It was a sea of red—bows, hearts, flowers, streamers, and large signs that blared in bold letters:

"Don't be a dunce; come to the dance!"
"Beware of Cupid's arrow!"
"Have a heart—be someone's valentine!"

A couple of girls were also gluing Necco candy hearts to lengths of ribbon and stringing them up along the hallway. The hearts had short messages on them: "Be true!" and "Be mine!" and "Kiss me!"

Johnny thought the last one was rather forward and distasteful until he recalled the rehearsal of *A Christmas Carol*, their school play last Christmas, when Emmy suddenly and out of nowhere planted a kiss squarely on his cheek. He was stunned—not only by her action, but also by the fact that he didn't find *that* kiss distasteful at all. To the contrary, in fact, Johnny rather liked it.

He smiled and then chuckled at another thought: the possibility of seeing Lazlo and Wilson and the rest of the school's goons gagging when they tried to eat the candy hearts off the ribbons the next day and ended up with a mouthful of glue.

Johnny headed down the hallway, navigating his way through the decorations—and excited females. At the door, yet another thought struck him: *Ben might be supervising them*. He scanned the hallway one last time, but Ben was nowhere to be seen amid the chattering girls. Johnny smirked at their

exuberance, shook his head, and exited the school building—completely missing the petite figure partially concealed behind a nearby barricade of streamers, watching his every move through infatuated eyes.

Outside, Johnny saw Emmy about half a block in front of him, heading home. Despite his fond memory of the Christmas play kiss, he noticed that she, too, had been quiet and distant lately, especially around him. He sighed and followed her, debating whether to call out to her.

She had been this way ever since Constant Bullfinch Day a few weeks ago, a local holiday that Johnny managed to wreck for the entire town. He had discovered that Constant, a boy considered to be a regional hero in the War for American Independence, was miscredited for the actions of his sister, Constance, who was the real hero. *Silly names,* he thought. *I mean, who would name their son Constant and their daughter Constance?*

When Johnny released proof of this information to *The Provenance Standard*, the whole town erupted, and the resulting uproar forced the mayor and town council to cancel the holiday. The trouble was that several local merchants counted on the revenue from Constant Bullfinch Day to see them through the first quarter of the year—including Emmy's father. Deep down, Johnny knew she was still sore about the whole situation, even though she came to Johnny's baptism in the river, as had Ben, and both of them seemed genuinely happy for him.

Johnny's baptism was one of two great things that had happened to him the past few months. The other, of course, was giving his life to the Lord. Still, it hadn't kept him from trouble, as the failed bank alarm and Constant Bullfinch Day fiascoes had proved. He shook his head. "I just want things to get back to normal," he muttered. "Whatever normal is now."

Johnny decided a good way to start would be to walk home with Emmy, the way they used to. She was about half a block ahead of him when he called out, "Hey, Emmy! Wait up!" and ran to catch up with her.

She turned, startled. As he approached, Johnny saw that

she was looking at what appeared to be a flowery card and a photograph. She hurriedly stuffed both into her bookbag. He only had a brief glimpse at the picture, but what he saw gave him pause. It was a photo of Al—Dashiell Hammett—the detective who was tailing Alvin Karpis and the thieves of Barrymore Banking and Trust! Emmy obviously had a crush on Al when he was here in December, but when he left town Johnny assumed that she'd forgotten all about him. And yet, here she was carrying around a picture of him. And, apparently, he was writing to her!

Johnny almost said something about it, but then he decided not to. *I'm already on her bad side*, he thought. Aloud he said, as lightly as he could, "Can we walk together?"

She gave him a curt smile and said, "If you like."

They turned and continued toward their homes.

After a few uncomfortable moments, Emmy said, "How's your face?"

Johnny blinked and immediately felt the pain again. He'd forgotten about it for a moment. "Oh! Uh, it's okay."

"Still looks a bit swollen. You should put more ice on it when you get home."

"I will. Thanks."

They walked along in silence again. Then he said, "How about those decorations?"

"Decorations?"

"In the main hallway at school. Some girls are putting up a bunch of folderols for the Saint Valentine's Day dance. You didn't see them?"

"No. Folderols?"

"Yeah, y'know, useless trifles."

"I know what *folderol* means," Emmy said stiffly. "But why does it apply to the decorations?"

Johnny snorted. "Well, for one thing, I had to walk through a virtual wall of crepe paper just to get out of the school. It's all a lot of flubdub."

"Flubdub."

"Yeah, y'know, flummery."

Emmy scowled at him. "Did you swallow a dictionary this

afternoon or something?"

"No," he said, mirroring her mocking tone. They turned onto their street. "I just find the whole thing a bit much, that's all."

"You don't like Saint Valentine's Day?"

He shrugged. "I just don't get it. All this buzz and to-do over a made-up holiday."

"Well, I like it," she said sharply. "I think it's nice we've set aside a day to celebrate love."

Johnny chuckled and then prattled on. "Oh, c'mon, Emmy. It's not celebrating *real* love, just some fake idea people have about love. I mean, if people knew the *factual* story of Saint Valentine, and how brutal and bloody his life was, they wouldn't want to celebrate it. Not to mention all those gangsters massacring each other in that garage in Chicago a few years back on Saint Valentine's Day. And yet, somehow his name is still cemented with a silly holiday involving hearts and flowers and sappy love poems. Folderol, flubdub, and flummery."

They were in front of Emmy's house now, and she stopped suddenly. "Flapdoodle!"

Johnny grinned. "Yeah! That's another good description!"

"Right," snapped Emmy, "for *you*!"

He stepped back. "Me?"

"Everything you're saying is sheer flapdoodle—nonsense. You may not like Saint Valentine's Day, John Avery Whittaker, but maybe you'd feel differently if you'd ever loved someone—more than you love yourself, that is." And with that, she turned on her heel and marched away from him and into her house, slamming the door behind her.

Johnny was stung by her words and baffled by her attitude. He blinked and winced as the pain returned. "One thing is for certain, I will *never* understand girls," he muttered as he headed toward his own front door.

Chapter Three

Johnny bounded up the porch steps and was just about to open the front door when he thought better of it. It wouldn't do to have his little sister, Charlie, see his bruised face and blurt out about it to his stepmother, Fiona. He loved Fiona dearly, but she did fret and worry so about him since her riding accident last Thanksgiving, especially when it came to injuries around the eyes. Fiona had been knocked from her horse at full gallop by a tree limb to her forehead, losing her sight as a result. Best not to give her undue alarm.

Johnny vaulted off the front porch steps and raced around to the kitchen door. He peered through the window. The coast looked clear. He gently turned the knob and pushed open the door quietly, pleased with himself that he had remembered to oil the hinges last week. So far, so good.

He stepped inside, closed the door behind him, and crept to the refrigerator, where he retrieved a lovely piece of cold, raw steak. He was just about to apply it to his eye when he heard a loud, "Rrruff!" followed by a high-pitched voice that squeaked, "What are you doing?"

Johnny jolted, nearly dropping the steak. Charlie stood in the kitchen doorway, a look of disgust on her face. Their dog,

McDuff, was right at her side. “Shh!” he hissed, but the mutt licked his chops and “ruffed” again, even louder!

Charlie yelled, “Mommy! Johnny’s trying to eat a piece of meat with his eye!”

“Charlie! Be—!” Johnny started to tell her to be quiet, but it was no good. The damage had been done. Johnny heard footsteps and the *click-click-click* of Fiona’s white cane as she hurried along the hallway. In mere seconds, Fiona appeared behind Charlie and McDuff. Johnny marveled at how she got around so fast!

“Stop right there, young man,” Fiona ordered. “What happened to ye?”

“What makes you think anything happened?” Johnny asked as innocently as he could muster. “Just because Charlie and McDuff—”

“You’re puttin’ raw steak on your face, lad! I don’t need yer sister or the dog to tell me. I can smell it meself! Now, gi’ it here, and tell me what happened.”

She moved to him, and he handed her the steak.

“Ach! Ye coulda at least put some tin foil around it!” McDuff’s tongue was hanging out of his mouth. Fiona felt for and opened a drawer under the counter, removed a roll of wrapping foil, and tore off a sheet.

“Y’know, it’s actually aluminum foil, not tin,” said Johnny. “I don’t know why people still call it *tin*, because there isn’t any tin in it, and it’s not accurate and they really should stop—”

Fiona cut him off. “Stop avoidin’ the question, John Avery.” She wrapped the foil sheet around the steak. “Sit!” she barked, and McDuff obeyed.

Johnny chuckled. “Not you, you traitor!”

McDuff whimpered and licked his chops again. Johnny moved to a chair at the dining room table and sank into it.

Fiona, Charlie, and McDuff followed, and Fiona handed Johnny the wrapped steak. “Now, put this on yer eye and tell me what happened. Were you fighting again?”

Johnny placed the cold foil on his face, covering his eye. It provided almost instant relief for the dull headache that was

still throbbing behind his left eye socket. “No, no fight,” he replied. “Just a minor incident on the basketball court. I had a little trouble handling a pass.”

“You’re supposed to catch those with your hands, not your face, you know,” said Charlie.

Fiona chortled, and Johnny glared at Charlie through his uncovered eye. “So I’ve been told. I’ll try to remember that next time. And when did you become such an expert at basketball?”

“I’m not an expert. It just makes sense.” Charlie rolled her eyes. “And you’re supposed to be so smart! Sheesh!”

Fiona stifled another chortle and said, “All right, Charlie, that’s enough. Go and play now.”

Charlie hopped off the chair and flounced up to her room, chanting, “Johnny doesn’t know how to play basketball! Johnny doesn’t know how to play basketball! Neaah-na! Neaah-na!”

“Where’s a good throw pillow when you need one?” Johnny muttered.

Fiona chuckled, then said seriously, “Are you sure you’re all right, John Avery?”

“I’m fine, Fiona. Really. No need to worry.” He patted her arm, and she smiled. He tapped the foil-wrapped steak on his eye. “I’ll be even better when I eat this tonight!”

“Now, tha’s for all of us.”

Johnny took the steak from his eye and examined it. “Really? All four? It’s so small.”

McDuff whined.

“Meat is gettin’ harder and harder to come by, and more and more expensive.”

Johnny frowned and handed the steak back to her. “Maybe I should get a job.”

“No need for tha’,” Fiona replied, rising from her chair. “We still ha’ plenty to eat. Just not a lot o’ meat. Yer father an’ the good Lord provide amply for us.”

“I know.”

Fiona made her way back into the kitchen, and Johnny noticed for the first time how weary she seemed. Despite her

optimism and cheery outlook, life had to be hard for her. *She needs help around here*, he thought, and then a brilliant idea popped into his head. *A housekeeper!* In the back of his mind, he began cataloguing employment possibilities around Provenance to help pay for one.

Fiona replaced the steak in the refrigerator, and McDuff harumphed and plopped down on the kitchen floor. Johnny grinned and asked, "Is Dad home yet?"

"Not yet, but I'm sure he's on his way."

"I think I'll go to my room and lie down for a little while."

"Fine idea," Fiona responded. "Rest that eye!"

Johnny got up and patted his thigh. "C'mon, McDuff! No sense in wallowing in disappointment." The pooch bounced up and bounded across the room and up the stairs with his master, who chanted, Charlie-style, "I really hate basketball! I really hate basketball! Neaah-na! Neaah-na!"

McDuff howled.

Johnny sat on his bed, and McDuff jumped by his side and made a beeline for his face, licking the lingering smell of the steak from his cheekbone. Johnny let him for a few seconds, then pushed him away. "Okay! All right! That's enough. Next time, don't give me away, you daft hound!"

McDuff snorted and then turned around three times and curled up on the bed at Johnny's feet.

Johnny was disappointed his father wasn't home yet. He wanted to talk with him about his grandfather's journal. He had agreed to let his dad, Harold, send it to researchers back in Scotland to have it translated. It was those researchers who had made the discovery that the mysterious cloth was actually from the robe of Jesus Christ. They also sent back a big package filled with other research, but Harold promptly commandeered it and had kept its contents to himself.

I've played nice, Johnny thought, *but the journal is mine, and I have the right to know what's in it.* "And, more importantly," he said aloud, "to get it *back*." But much like Ben, Harold had evaded and avoided him of late. At least it sure seemed that way to Johnny.

He closed his eyes and thought of jobs he could do around

town to earn money to pay for a housekeeper for Fiona. Then another thought occurred to him: Even if he did earn the cash, where would he find a likely candidate? While he was fairly certain local people could use the extra money, he wasn't sure hiring a local as a housekeeper was a good idea in such a small town. Even in the midst of a major economic upheaval, people had their pride, and that was especially true in the South, as he had learned the hard way. Johnny didn't like the idea of everyone in the town knowing their personal business either.

He pondered the situation but soon fell asleep. A short while later, he jerked awake and said out loud, "Of course!" The solution was obvious—at least the first step of it was—and it might even help solve one of his other problems as well! All he had to do was . . .

He heard his father's car pull into the driveway. Filing the solution away in his brain, Johnny hopped off the bed, looked out his window, and growled. McDuff, who was still curled up on the bed, growled back. "That wasn't for you, lazy dog," Johnny grumbled. "Looks like I won't be able to talk to Dad today, either. He's brought guests home with him."

Johnny watched as his father exited his car and waited while a man in the car behind exited his. The guest, a tall, lanky fellow, seemed vaguely familiar to Johnny, though he couldn't place him. Johnny also noticed there was someone else in the guest's car, in the front passenger seat. The lanky gent motioned for the man to wait there. He then followed Harold into the house.

Johnny heard the front door open and close, and Harold's muffled voice greet Fiona and introduce the guest to her. The guest's equally muffled voice was animated and boisterous. After a moment, Harold called out clearly, "John! Could you come down here, please? There's someone I'd like you to meet!"

Johnny looked at McDuff, now sprawled across his bed. "Don't get up on my account," he said sarcastically as he walked to the door.

The dog looked at him and yawned as if to say, "I don't

intend to."

Johnny smiled, opened the door, and went downstairs.

Chapter Four

Harold stood next to the lanky fellow who, up close, appeared even taller and lankier than Johnny expected. The man had salt-and-pepper hair, gray eyes, a long, hooked nose, and thin lips that seemed stuck in a permanent smile. He wore gray sweatpants and gym sneakers, a gray T-shirt with a caricature of a blue devil on the chest, and a blue blazer with a smaller blue devil caricature on the chest pocket. He leaned forward slightly, as if his nose were too heavy to keep him from standing upright. Johnny thought the overall effect rather comical.

Harold said, "John, I'd like you to meet Duke University's varsity basketball head coach, Ira Naismith. Ira, my son, John Whittaker."

Basketball coach? thought Johnny. *Since when does Dad care about basketball?*

Coach Naismith's hand shot out and grabbed Johnny's, and they shook. The coach's hand was rough and bony, his fingers long and powerful. His voice was a bit raspy and nasal, and though he had a Southern accent, he spoke fast and clipped. "Pleased to meetcha, son! Mighty pleased indeed!"

"Yes, sir. Pleased to meet you."

“Polite, too! You’re raisin’ him good, Harry. You too, Fedalia!”

Johnny suppressed a smile as he saw his father take a deep breath. “That’s Harold and Fiona,” Harold corrected.

The coach nodded. “Right! Well, don’t just stand there, Harry! Tell the boy why we’re here!”

Harold pursed his lips and replied, “Oh, I think *you* should tell him, Ira. It’s your idea.” He turned to Johnny. “Coach Naismith has an interesting proposition for you, son.”

Johnny blinked. “Oh?” *This should be good*.

Coach Ira guffawed. “*Proposition*,” he mocked. “Leave it to an egghead to use a twenty-five-cent word when a two-penny one will do. I wanna make a deal with you, son!”

“What kind of deal?”

“A deal to help us win Tobacco Road!” The coach beamed.

Johnny glanced at Fiona, who looked completely confused, and then scanned from the coach to his father and back again. “Uh, Tobacco Road?”

“The Tobacco Road Tournament!” replied the coach. “T-R-T! The Tar Heels, the Wolfpack, the Demon Deacons, and the Blue Devils!” He opened his coat at the last and revealed the whole caricature.

Johnny was still mystified. “Sounds like you need some hunters and an exorcist!”

Coach Naismith roared with laughter. “Sense of humor, too! You’re a pip, son, a real pip!”

Johnny looked at Harold helplessly. Harold stepped in. “The Tobacco Road Tournament is a basketball competition consisting of four teams, John: the University of North Carolina Tar Heels, the North Carolina State University Wolfpack, the Wake Forest University Deacon Demons, and the Duke University Blue Devils. These schools have a long and storied rivalry—”

“It’s Demon Deacons,” the coach cut in. “And *I’ll* say we have a rivalry! Goin’ back to the aught-five/aught-six season!” He began pacing around the living room. “We’ve been creamed most years since then, creamed corn! But this year we got us a real chance! We got us a guard who can take us

all the way! Shoot, pass, rebound—this boy does it all. And he dribbles like no one I've never seen!"

"Maybe he should see a doctor," said Johnny, ignoring the double negative.

"Dribbling is when the player takes the ball down the court," whispered Fiona, and both Johnny and Harold gave her a double take.

"Right you are, little lady!" the coach said as he passed by her. "And he's the best! Duke's gotta real chance this year, I tell ya! This boy can bring us the T-R-T championship for the first time in years!" He turned and pointed at Johnny. "And *you're* the key to help him do it!"

"Me?" said Johnny, pointing to himself. "But I'm terrible at basketball! Just ask anybody!"

"Maybe so," the coach replied. "But your pap here tells me you're great at *science*!"

Johnny looked at his father, stunned. "You did?"

Harold's face reddened slightly, and he said in a quiet voice, "Yes, John. It's no secret how intelligent you are."

It was one of the few times—maybe even the first time—Johnny could remember feeling his father's pleasure and pride in his abilities, and a wave of affection for Harold washed over him. Johnny turned just in time to see Fiona smile broadly and brush away a tear.

The coach looked back and forth at Johnny and Harold and said, "Y'all need a minute?"

Johnny shook his head and said, "I'm afraid I still don't understand. What does science have to do with basketball?"

"A whole lot," said the coach, "if my star player don't pass it."

"Pass it? You mean pass his science course?"

"Yes, John," Harold responded. "You see, Victor—that's the young man's name—is holding his own in most of his courses, even in my Comparative Religions class. But when it comes to science, well . . ."

"He stinks!" the coach interjected. "That's why we've come to you, son! We thought that with your smarts, maybe you can help Victor—y'know, be his tutor!"

Johnny couldn't believe what he was hearing. "Well, I'm flattered, but surely Duke has tutors! Why don't you get one of them?"

"Don't you think we tried that?" Coach Ira replied, shaking his head. "Sure, Duke's got great tutors. World class. But they haven't worked out for Victor. They're all too . . . well, *academic*. They can't seem to get the information across to Victor in a way he can understand."

"We thought you may be able to explain things in a less academic way, John," said Harold. "A way that will still get the information across in a way he can retain it."

Less academic? Johnny wasn't sure whether he should be flattered or insulted.

Suddenly, Coach Ira folded his hands as if in prayer. "Help us out, son!" Coach Ira pleaded. "If Victor don't pass his next science test, he won't be able to play in the T-R-T! We'll pay you, o'course!"

"Pay me?" Johnny marveled at how God answered a prayer he hadn't even prayed yet. Here he was looking for a way to earn money for a housekeeper for Fiona, and in walks this guy!

But Coach Ira apparently took Johnny's pause as reticence. "Look," he said. "Victor's out in the car. Just meet him! He didn't wanna come in before because he wasn't sure about this, but I know when you meet him, you'll see he's the kinda person you really wanna help. And he'll like you, too." He edged toward the front door.

Johnny smiled and said, "Sure. Invite him in."

Coach Ira pumped his fist. "Yeah! You wait right here!" He bolted out the door.

Johnny, Harold, and Fiona all exhaled. "My goodness!" Fiona exclaimed.

"Indeed," added Harold.

"He's a real force of nature, isn't he?" Johnny asked.

"To put it politely," Harold murmured.

"Harold," Fiona scolded playfully.

"Where did you learn about dribbling?" Harold asked her.

She shrugged with just a tinge of haughtiness. "I hear

things," she said with a sniff.

"From who?" asked Johnny.

"*Whom*," said Harold. "And yes, from whom?"

Fiona grinned. "From Charlie. She and Emmy's little sister, Henny, like to play basketball at the park. There's a lady there who's teaching 'em and several other children all the gobbledygook and lingo. And by the way, everyone's talking about the Tobacco Road Tournament. They're very excited. It seems like a big deal."

"Oh, it is," said Harold. "Everyone at Duke is excited as well."

"What about at your school, John?"

"I guess," Johnny replied. "I haven't noticed. I really don't care much for basketball." Then he looked at his father earnestly. "Do you think I should do this, Dad?"

"Well," said Harold, "if you do, it'll be a great honor—and a big responsibility."

"I'm not sure about taking payment, though," said Fiona.

"Why not?" asked Johnny.

"It's our Christian duty to help those in need, John Avery."

"True," said Harold, "but Scripture says, 'The worker is worthy of his wages.'"

Before Johnny could respond, the front door opened again, and Coach Ira reentered with a tall, powerfully built young man. He was dressed in sneakers and a gray sweat suit with the Duke Blue Devils caricature on the front, and Johnny thought there was something very familiar about him.

"Hello, Professor Whittaker," he said shyly, shuffling his feet.

Harold nodded. "Victor."

Coach Ira motioned to Fiona and Johnny. "And here's the rest of the family. This is the professor's wife, Fedalia."

Harold sighed.

"Pleased to meet you, ma'am," Victor said.

"Likewise, Victor. And it's Fiona."

Coach Ira jumped in again. "And here's the young man I really want you to meet! Victor, this is John Whittaker. John, meet Victor Farnsworth!"

Johnny started to hold out his hand, but it froze halfway up. “Farnsworth?” Johnny quickly studied the face. The features were right—no wonder he looked familiar. “You aren’t related to Lazlo Farnsworth, are you?”

Victor smiled. “Yeah, I am! I’m his older brother!”

A fifty-pound rock slammed into the pit of Johnny’s stomach. He lowered his hand and slowly backed away, shaking his head. “No. No, no, no, no! Absolutely not!” Johnny turned and stomped out of the room, through the downstairs hallway, and into the Inner Sanctum, his father’s office.

He heard Harold and Fiona apologize profusely and invite Victor and Coach Naismith to have a seat. Moments later, both his parents stormed into the office. “What was the meaning of that?” his father demanded in a low but harsh tone.

“Your rudeness is inexcusable!” Fiona added.

“Really?” Johnny retorted. “’Cause I think it’s very excusable!”

“Don’t use that tone with your mother!” Harold barked. “Explain yourself, young man!”

“Didn’t you hear?” asked Johnny. “That is Lazlo Farnsworth’s brother! *Lazlo Farnsworth!*”

“So?”

“Lazlo’s the biggest bully in school!” Johnny began pacing back and forth in front of his father’s oak desk. “You see this?” He pointed to the bruise on his face. “This is from Victor’s precious little brother, Lazlo! He’s targeted me ever since he started going to Brookhaven. You remember when I got kicked out of the play and expelled through Christmas break last year?”

Harold frowned. “Yes.”

“Well, that was Lazlo’s doing too! He played the Ghost of Christmas Future, and he kept cracking me on the head with his staff when the teachers weren’t looking. When he finally hit me so hard I saw stars, I’d had enough and kneecapped him with a karate kick. Of course, the principal happened to be watching then, so I was the one who got into trouble and

expelled, while he got off scot-free!"

"Oh, Johnny!" Fiona cried. "That's terrible! We didn't know!"

"Well, now you do!" Johnny seethed. "It's bad enough that I have to endure abuse from Lazlo every day! There's *no way* I'll agree to being abused by his older brother too! I won't play the sap by tutoring the brother of the biggest bully in the school. I wouldn't tutor him if he was the last person on—"

Johnny stopped himself. Victor stood in the doorway. He looked as if he was about to cry. "I'm so sorry for what my brother has done to you," Victor said with a shaky voice. "So sorry! I promise you he'll answer for it—for everything. And I also promise you that as of right now, his bullying stops. All of it, if he knows what's good for him, the little twerp. Whether you decide to tutor me or not."

Johnny suddenly felt very small. He stammered, "I—I—"

"Look," Victor interrupted. "I know I don't deserve it, but I'd really appreciate any help you can give me, because I need it. A *lot*." He took a step forward, and his long legs almost covered the complete distance between them with one step. "Please," he said, "I'm asking you, *please* will you help me?"

Johnny looked for some guidance from Harold and Fiona. They said nothing, but he got the distinct impression that they were somehow mind-melding with him about his Christian duty. Johnny sighed. "Would Monday after school be a good time to start?"

Suddenly Coach Naismith burst into the room past Victor and Johnny's parents, grabbed Johnny's hand, and pumped it profusely. "It'll be a great time to start! Perfect! Thank you, thank you, thank you so much!"

From behind him, Victor smiled at Johnny. "Yes, thank you so much."

After a few more pleasantries, the coach and Victor said their good-byes and left. Once they'd gone and the front door shut behind them, Fiona blew out a huge sigh of relief. "Whew! I'm glad that drama's over! And I'm very proud of ye, John Avery."

"As am I," Harold added a bit stiffly. "Though not about

your storming out of the room."

Johnny's cheeks turned pink as he offered an apology. "Sorry about that. And thank you both."

Fiona hugged him. "Yer welcome, laddie, though I'm still not sure ye should be takin' money for this."

"Let the boy alone, Fiona," Harold said. "The pittance Coach Naismith offered him is about as close as John can get to taking no money."

They all chuckled. Fiona took another deep breath. "Well, I'd best be getting the supper on!" As she made her way into the kitchen, Johnny again admired how quickly she had learned to cope with her disability and was thankful that, now that he was making a little money, it hopefully wouldn't be long before he could get her some help around the house.

He turned to his father, who was just settling into his chair with his pipe and the evening paper. This seemed the perfect opportunity to confront him about the journal. "Dad, I wonder if we could talk about—"

But Harold cut him off. "No, John," he said wearily, "no more talk. Not now. It's been a long week and an even longer afternoon. I just want to have a peaceful dinner and a restful weekend. We can talk some other time. All right?"

"Yes, sir." Johnny sighed. He headed for the stairs and his room when Harold stopped him.

"Oh, by the way," Harold said, "there is one more thing I wanted to tell you. Good news! I talked with Karl Mangle today at the university. Steve is out of the hospital and at home."

Johnny perked up. "Really?"

"Yes. And Karl said he'd love visitors."

"That's great! Thanks, Dad!"

Johnny bounded up the stairs. He and his father would need to talk later, but for now, he was thankful to God! Steve was doing better!

Chapter Five

Johnny awoke the next morning feeling groggy. He dreamt strange dreams all night long, but he couldn't recall any, save one: Professor Karl Mangle and his son Paul chasing him, screaming for him to stop. The dream unnerved him, considering he was determined to visit Steve first thing that morning.

Brushing the thought aside, Johnny hurriedly got ready for the day and went downstairs. He grabbed an apple and told Fiona he didn't have time for a proper breakfast. He wanted to get to Steve's while Steve had more strength.

"You're a growing boy, John Avery. You need nourishing," she said, pulling out a pan.

"You know what they say: An apple a day keeps the doctor away! And this one looks especially nourishing." He took a bite. "Mmm. I can feel the nourishment flowing within me already!"

Johnny's tone pleaded for a waiver from Fiona's traditional Saturday smorgasbord of breakfast, which would delay him at least thirty minutes—longer, since it was his turn to help with the dishes.

Fiona sighed. "You're battin' those puppy dog eyes at me,

aren't ye?" She paused, and then added, "Fine. But dunna blame me when you're starving to death in an hour!"

Before she could change her mind, Johnny kissed her on the cheek and bolted out the door and up to the Capello home. He had called Emmy the night before to invite her along. Despite the current emotional distance between them, she was eager to join him. They ran most of the way, and after being admitted with a big smile by Mrs. Mangle, they walked keenly into Steve's room.

Steve sat in his chair, studying the newspaper.

"What's the news, Professor?" Johnny asked.

"Who cares? I'm reading a new comic called *The Phantom*. He fights crime in the jungles of Bangalia, Africa."

"I don't think there is such a place," Johnny said.

"There is in the comic," Steve chided. "And he wears a snazzy blue outfit. He was just caught by a couple of goons and sentenced to be *boiled alive*!"

Emmy winced. "Sounds . . . interesting."

"It sure is! But I think this Sala gal will wind up saving his life or something. She's got a big-time crush on the Phantom."

"Probably the snazzy blue outfit," Emmy said.

Johnny and Emmy sat on the floor in front of Steve's chair. Johnny smiled. "I'm glad you finally made it home. You were in that hospital forever."

"No baloney. I don't know how anybody can get better in a hospital. Hey, aren't you two supposed to be in school?"

"It's Saturday," Johnny answered. "As much as I like school, I rarely go on weekends."

Mrs. Mangle entered the room with a tray. On it were a plate of homemade powdered donuts and mugs of steaming Ovaltine. "I hope you two didn't have breakfast this morning," she said.

"No, ma'am, I didn't," Emmy said.

"I had an apple," Johnny admitted.

"For *Frühstück*—er, breakfast?" Professor Karl Mangle said in his German accent, entering the room. "A growing *Junge* needs something hearty! Und his vitamins und minerals, as well! Und we all know Ovaltine gives us that!" He hoisted a

mug from the tray.

"*Ja, Papa!*" Paul, Steve's brother, said, appearing beside their father. "More Ovaltine, *bitte*!"

Karl laughed. Emmy smiled. Steve rolled his eyes.

But Johnny shrank at the sight of Karl and Paul. Last night's dream, the memory of Paul's anger over what happened with Johnny's "magic cloth," as Paul called it, and Karl's panicked demands for it before Christmas made Johnny wonder if he had walked into a hornet's nest.

Quite to the contrary, however, and much to Johnny's surprise, they were altogether cordial. Karl told a joke half in German that made no sense at all to Johnny, but it was hilarious to his family, who laughed heartily. Emmy even chuckled at it, but probably only out of politeness.

Paul seemed very much like his old self again. He mentioned how he gave his brother a bear hug when he got home from the hospital but mixed up the words as usual and instead said he "gave him a hair bug," which spurred even more laughter.

Johnny guessed that the Mangles must have changed their opinions of him after he delivered the money from selling Steve's Christmas cards, which featured Steve's drawings. He heard that the money paid off a sizable portion of Steve's medical bills.

Johnny was in the middle of telling the story of how Lazlo Farnsworth whacked him in the face with the basketball when he happened to glance up at the professor. The jovial Karl had suddenly melted away, and the suspicious Karl had reappeared.

Johnny knew Mangle must be musing over the healing cloth. His eyes said that he was positive Johnny had it. And that he desperately wanted it. *And* that he would not stop until he had it. Harold once told Johnny that the eyes are the window into the soul. It was a brief glimpse, but seeing Karl's eyes made Johnny believe it was true.

And . . . it made Johnny believe Professor Mangle's soul was inherently evil.

An hour passed. Everyone played an unusually fast game

of Monopoly. Mrs. Mangle won. Johnny came in last. Afterward, Professor Mangle wandered off to do some work, and Mrs. Mangle left to make lunch.

Steve suggested a brisk round of Chip the Tooth, but Johnny wasn't interested. "Remember last time we played, it hit me smack on the eyeball? My eye hemorrhaged and turned beet-red, and when Fiona found out she put the kibosh on ever playing it again."

"I guess we should change the name to Hemorrhage the Eyeball," Steve quipped.

"I have an idea," Emmy interjected. "Let's listen to the radio! *Mrs. Wiggs of the Cabbage Patch* is almost on!"

Steve snorted. "Mrs. *Who* of the *What*?"

"*Mrs. Wiggs of the Cabbage Patch!*" repeated Emmy.

"Isn't that a book?" asked Johnny.

"And a film?" added Paul.

Emmy nodded. "And now it's a radio show! It started last year. It's really good!"

The boys looked at each other and shrugged. "Okay by me," said Steve. Paul retrieved the family's Philco Model 90 Cathedral tabletop radio from the living room and perched it precariously on Steve's chest of drawers. Emmy clicked it on and moved the dial to the appropriate station, just in time for the announcer's golden tones to welcome them to the Wiggses' cozy home in the little hamlet of Cabbage Patch. Emmy stared at the radio with rapt attention.

After five minutes, Johnny's mind began to wander, and he was suddenly aware of sniggering behind him. He turned just in time to see Steve making a goofy face, silently mocking the program's dialogue, and Paul trying in vain to stifle his laughter.

Johnny also grinned, and then he glanced at Emmy, who was still listening intently. He tried to affect a stern expression to scold Steve and Paul.

Steve stuck out his tongue at him and then made a particularly goofy face just as Paul took a large gulp from his mug. Paul exploded in a fit of laughter and coughing, spurting Ovaltine out of his mouth and nose and all over the floor.

Johnny also busted out laughing.

Emmy whipped around, confused. “What’s going on?”

Johnny swallowed his laughter, while Paul continued to laugh and cough, wiping off his face, nose, and chin with his sleeve.

“What?” Emmy repeated.

Steve looked at her as though she had just read every article from *Good Housekeeping* out loud for an hour and said, “You actually *like* this dopey show?”

Emmy blinked, taken aback, and looked rapidly between the radio and Steve. “Well . . . uh . . . sure! I mean, it’s fun!”

“If by ‘fun’ you mean boring and silly, then yeah! Loads!” said Steve.

Emmy frowned. “Well, it’s kind of a serial. You have to sorta follow it for a while.”

“I’d like to follow it to the river and push it in,” Paul joked.

“Once you get going with it, it’s more entertaining!” Emmy insisted.

“Influenza would be more entertaining,” Johnny muttered, and Paul burst out laughing again.

“Fine,” Emmy harumphed. She got up and turned off the radio with a decisive flourish. “There. Happy?”

“Yup, totally happy,” Steve said with a smirk.

“Me too.” Paul hiccupped.

Johnny just held up his hands.

Emmy rolled her eyes. “Boys! Unless something’s blowing up or a creature from another planet tries to take over the universe, they lose interest.”

“Come on, Emmy,” Johnny said. “A Neanderthal could create a better radio play than that.”

“Well, then, maybe *you* should try.” She crossed her arms.

Paul snickered and coughed again, and Johnny shrugged. Steve thought for a minute, then said, “Actually, I think Emmy’s right.”

Paul laughed again. “Yeah, you are a Theanernal!”

“No, you nitwit!” Steve pointed at Johnny. “I mean, *you* should make your own radio play. Ooh! And it could be about

something really good, like *The Phantom*!"

Johnny smiled. It was good to see Steve so enthusiastic.

"Oh, yeah, that'd be the bee's knees," Emmy scoffed, shaking her head.

Steve ignored the sarcasm. "Sure would! Whaddya say there, Whit?"

Johnny looked thoughtful and nodded. "First, I say don't call me Whit. And second, I think we should *all* do it. It'd be fun!"

"Not me," Emmy protested. "I'm not into boiling people alive."

Johnny huffed, exasperated. "We can choose a *different* story, Emmy. Think about it! What epic tale have you always wanted to be part of?"

There was a moment of silent consideration, and then Paul blurted out, "*Pater Pen*!" Everyone looked confused until he corrected, "I mean, *Peter Pan*!"

"Yes!" Johnny grabbed a pencil and blank piece of paper from Steve's drawing desk and wrote *Peter Pan* on it. "That's great, Paul! What else?"

Suddenly the flood gates opened, and they all started tossing out story ideas, even Emmy. *The Wizard of Oz*. *Treasure Island*. *Anne of Green Gables*. *Swiss Family Robinson*. *The Three Musketeers*. *The Count of Monte Cristo*. *Aesop's Fables*. *The Iliad*. *The Odyssey*.

After they finished the ideas list and engaged in some debate, they voted. *Anne of Green Gables* got one vote (Emmy), and *Treasure Island* got three (everyone else). Steve had a copy of the book, so Johnny retrieved it from the small bookshelf and started handing out parts.

Johnny wanted to play the main character, Jim Hawkins, but he didn't say so aloud until Steve suggested it. Paul wanted to play Billy Bones. The only part Emmy would take was the physician, Dr. Livesey. But Steve couldn't see himself playing anything.

"Why not?" Johnny asked. "This was your idea!"

"Sure, but for you guys, not me."

"I think you'd be great as Captain Smollett," Johnny said.

“He’s a real take-charge kind of guy. Or better yet, Long John Silver! With your talent for voices, you’d make a splendid pirate!”

Steve yawned. “I’d rather listen,” he said.

“But why?” Emmy asked. “Are you upset that there’s nobody in it with a snazzy blue outfit?”

“No, Miss Smarty Pants,” Steve answered snidely. “For one thing, I’m not an actor. Besides, who’d believe that I, of all people, could be the captain of a ship . . . or a pirate . . . or anyone else?”

“That’s the great thing about stories!” Johnny exclaimed. “Especially radio plays! You can be anyone or anything you want to be. You can be a sheriff who chases outlaws, or an eagle flying over mountains, or you can escape from the Chateau d’If, or well, *anything*! All you need is imagination!”

“Exactly,” Steve said. “And I can’t imagine myself doing any of those things. The only things I can see myself doing happen from this chair.”

Emmy’s expression softened, and she put her hand gently on Steve’s arm. “Nonsense. I really think you’d be great at—”

Steve pulled his arm away limply. “I appreciate you all coming over, but I’m getting tired. It’s been a long morning.” He turned his head with some effort and looked out the window.

Paul stood up. “You should both leave. Steve needs to rest.”

Johnny and Emmy exchanged glances, and Johnny nodded. “Let’s go, Emmy.” They arose, and Johnny looked down at Steve, who did seem a bit fatigued. “We’ll see you later, okay?”

Steve kept staring out the window. “Sure. Thanks for stopping by,” he said blandly. A shadow of despondency fell over his face.

Johnny and Emmy exited the room, thanked Karl and Mrs. Mangle, and walked home in silence.

Johnny glanced at Emmy occasionally, but she gave no indication that she wanted to talk to him. *I guess she’s still sore at me*, he thought. Or maybe she was just feeling the same

thing he was: sadness about Steve. But as he thought about it, he realized he was feeling more than just sadness. It was a deeper sensation . . . peculiar, persistent, almost nagging, as though he'd forgotten something very important.

They'd had a February frost last night, and the late morning was still cold and crisp. Along the roadside, Johnny and Emmy passed by little puddles of water that had frozen in icy layers, and their every footfall produced sounds of crunching, crackling, and popping. Johnny's imagination took over, and for a brief moment, he and Emmy were explorers in the Arctic, braving polar bears who looked a lot like Lazlo and Wilson, and searching for treasure-laden, sunken, and ice-trapped cargo ships. McDuff was their lead sled dog, and Johnny could even imagine Paul with them, messing up his sentences as he tried to chronicle the journey.

Only Steve wasn't there.

Johnny shook his head to free himself from his reverie. There had to be some way he could help Steve imagine himself in an adventure. There just *had* to be.

But how?

As they approached their homes, Emmy muttered a quick "Bye," and they parted. Johnny watched her dash across the lawn, up her front steps, and inside her house, and he sighed deeply. He didn't want to lose her friendship, just as he didn't want to lose Steve's. Or Paul's. It was the first time he'd had a lot of friends, and he wanted to keep them all for as long as he could.

Johnny headed toward his own house, and the nagging feeling that he'd forgotten something returned stronger than ever. He still didn't know where it came from, but he felt he *ought* to know, which only made it worse.

What *was* it?

What had he forgotten?

Chapter Six

The means to help Steve imagine himself in an adventure presented itself the next day, *and in the most unlikely of places*, Johnny thought. Then he realized it wasn't unlikely at all.

It came as Johnny sat by his parents and Charlie in their regular pew at church, listening to the pastor's sermon. The topic was divine courage in the face of adversity, and one of the examples was David versus Goliath. The pastor used photographic slides with images of a shepherd boy and a giant to illustrate his sermon points. *Slides!* Johnny marveled. It was a first for the church and for the pastor's sermon!

Johnny was especially impressed with how the slides enhanced the pastor's presentation. Johnny's mind whirred with ideas. Suppose there were a way to add sound to the slides, like a movie, but more? In addition to sights and sounds, could he also add smells and tastes and touch? And perhaps take it even further—to make someone *participate* in the presentation? *That* would really make Steve feel as if he were part of the adventure!

Johnny mused over the ideas all the way home and throughout lunch, only marginally participating in the family conversation.

When the meal was finished and Harold rose from the table to retreat to the Inner Sanctum, Johnny's thoughts turned to his grandfather's journal. He hurriedly helped Fiona clear the table and do the dishes, and then scampered down the hallway to Harold's office. The door hung ajar. Johnny paused before entering, gathering himself and musing on the best way to broach the subject.

"Come in, John," his father said.

Although Harold's tone was mild and measured, Johnny's heart raced. He offered up a brief prayer for the right words, and then entered the Sanctum.

"Hi, Dad," he casually remarked.

Harold looked bemused. "'Dad,' is it? You must want something."

A flush crept up Johnny's face. He hoped the dim lighting hid his reddening shade. "Can't a boy just want to hang out with his father for—"

"You're blushing, John."

So much for those dim lights.

"I know why you're here," Harold continued. "You want to talk about the journal."

How does he do *that?* Johnny cocked his head. "Yes, sir."

"That's fortuitous. I have some information about it for you. Have a seat."

Johnny blinked and slipped into the large leather chair in front of the grand oak desk. Harold opened one of the desk drawers and pulled out the large envelope they had received after Christmas from the people overseas who were researching and translating the journal. He opened the envelope, pulled out a raft of papers, and set them on his desk.

"Is that the translation?" Johnny asked.

"First things first," said Harold. "Do you remember the manuscript I showed you—the one about the knights who guarded the cloak?"

Johnny nodded. "Yes, but they lost the cloak when Sir Edward stole it away."

Harold tapped the desk. "The passage we saw wasn't

complete. There's an additional section that hadn't been included in the document I found."

"Where did you find the rest of it?" Johnny asked.

Harold inhaled deeply. "In part, from your grandfather's journal."

Johnny felt a chill run down his spine.

Harold sorted through the papers from the envelope, removed a large section of them from the top of the stack, walked around the desk, pulled up another chair beside Johnny's, and sat in it. "Here," he said, handing the stack to Johnny.

Johnny looked at his father. He took the stack, set it on his lap, and gently lifted the top paper.

Harold pointed halfway down the page. "Begin there. That'll give you a running start into where we left off."

> The fissure in the wall was not large and had been caused by an earthquake shortly after Sir William had received his charge. There was not enough space for a hand to pass through, save for one portion up near the ceiling where it had fragmented. With no small effort, Sir William pulled free a rock embedded there. Then he reached into the opening, expecting to find the cloak.
>
> "'Tis not there," a voice behind him said.
>
> Sir William turned. Sir Edward stood before him, his hand gripping the hilt of his sword.
>
> "Edward, what have you done?"
>
> "Fear not, the robe is safe," he said. "In a place only I know of."
>
> "How . . . when . . . ?"
>
> "A week back. I relieved the guards on duty."
>
> "But how did you know where it was hidden?"
>
> "Gawain says much when he has drunk much."
>
> "The robe is a sacred object, Edward. It is not for men to decide its fate or how it is used, you know that."
>
> "What I know is that it is in my possession. What

you need know is that it will not help you."

"Help me? Help me how?"

Before he could react, Sir William saw the torchlight flash from the movement of Sir Edward's blade and felt the burning heat of it penetrate his side and into his lung.

Sir William fell to the ground. He could not call out. He could not breathe.

Sir Edward smiled cruelly. He whispered, "The cloak cannot save your life. Not anymore."

Sir William looked on him, his eyes open wide in astonishment as if to say, "Why are you doing this? What have you done?"

Sir Edward sheathed his sword. "I cannot have you telling anyone. This is the only way."

Sir William's eyes slowly closed, and the world became lost to him. Edward turned and called out, "Quickly! Come! Sir William has fallen!"

Instantly, the troop of knights stood beside him. Sir Geoffroi bent down over Sir William. After a moment, he stood.

"Sir William is sleeping with the saints," he softly said.

"A noble knight, if e'er there be one," Sir Edward added.

Sir Gawain, struggling to control his emotions, bent his knee. "Almighty Lord, we ask Thee to take the soul of Thy servant Sir William Hawkwood into Thy bosom. Through Christ, our Lord."

All in the room added, "Amen."

They disassembled to complete their task, remove the dead, and restore the sacred relics into their rightful place.

Sir Gawain stopped Sir Edward and asked, "How did this happen? I saw him a moment ago. He was untouched."

"I know not. Perhaps a Mamluk warrior gave his last to slay him." Then Sir Edward of Woodstock

walked off.

Sir Gawain Mac Illiuntaig placed his hand in the cleft where the cloak had been hidden.

It was not there.

Sir Gawain found Sir Edward later that night at a local inn, leaning over a plate of roast lamb, a slice of bread, and a grip of cheese. Several other knights of the Order of the Holy Sepulcher sat at a table across the room. Sir Gawain sat down at Sir Edward's table.

"Sitting alone again?"

"I prefer solitude when grieving the loss of a brother," Sir Edward said.

"Do you indeed?" Sir Gawain said. "I've never seen you grieve before."

"Sir William was of a better breed than these others." He cast his eye to the table where sat the other knights.

Sir Gawain leaned in. "Is that why you killed him?" he asked.

Sir Edward feigned shock. "Absurd. Sir William was careless. I found him as he lay."

"Not as careless as you imagine. Before our brother died, he whispered two words to Sir Geoffroi. Do you care to know what they were?"

"I believe you will tell me, so I need not care."

"The first word was 'Traitor.' And the second . . . 'Edward.'"

Sir Edward broke off a bit of bread and ate. After a moment, he answered, "He must have meant someone else betrayed him. And he wished that I should avenge him."

"No, Edward," Sir Gawain said. "I asked our brother that very thing. He looked at me and somberly shook his head."

Edward suddenly pushed back his plate. "The man was dying. He was confused. I did not do it. I swear."

Sir Gawain watched and waited for some telltale

sign of Edward's perjury. Nothing. Nothing but a cold, disdainful stare. But he knew. Sir Edward was not a man who could be trusted. He had changed over the years. Once the best knight of them all, a darkness had crept into his soul of late. Sir Gawain wondered what provoked this change. Sir Edward had suffered loss, but all men do. To slay a brother of the Order meant his soul had rotted deep into his core. Sir Gawain sat back in his chair.

"The cloak in the cleft—the one you stole, Edward—was not the sacred cloak."

Sir Edward looked up quickly. Angrily.

"Suspecting your blackened heart," Sir Gawain said, "I feigned my drunkenness that night and revealed the location of the cloak as a test against your character. But before doing so, I removed the relic. I replaced it with the burial cloak of Gamaliel. It, too, is a relic, but not the true pearl of great price that we have been charged to protect with our lives. That cloak is safely hidden, and only I know its whereabouts."

"You cur!" Sir Edward growled. "Where is it? Tell me!"

"I will not. The duty to safeguard it is now my sole burden to bear. Pity that I should have to protect it from a knight in the Order."

Sir Edward stood. His hand gripped the hilt of his sword. "What now?"

"You will leave the Order."

"And if I do not?"

"I will make your treachery known to all, including the king."

Sir Edward began to pull his sword from its scabbard, but before he could, the knights who occupied the other table were at his side, their weapons already drawn.

Sir Gawain said, "I already told these faithful men. Do not make them do to you as you did to Sir

William.”

Sir Edward glared at the assemblage, then turned about and stormed out of the inn.

As the eldest son of King Edward III, heir to the English throne, and formerly one of the most respected knights of the age, Sir Edward yearned to possess the cloak and tried many times hence to procure it. Stories were told of the properties of the cloak, its power to heal. He believed it held the power to secure his reign for ages. Edward’s heart turned black, his soul so poisoned with anger and greed that he became known throughout the realm as The Prince of the Black Heart.

Two decades later, Sir Edward the Blackheart’s truest friend and trusted confidant, Chandros, died, leaving behind a wife and small son. Despite his malevolence, Sir Edward provided for them. Suffering greatly with illness since the Spanish Campaign, Sir Edward confided in Chandros’s son, Andros, about the cloak, believing it held the power to heal him. And he believed that Sir Gawain knew of its whereabouts. At the age of fifteen years plus one, Andros vowed to Sir Edward that he would do whatever was necessary to procure the cloak and return it to the prince. But days later, Sir Edward, consumed with his illness and poisoned soul, died. Out of reverence for the man who had cared for him and his mother, the boy took on the name of his benefactor, calling himself Andros the Black, guard of the realm. And, in spite of Sir Edward’s death, Andros spent his life carrying out his vow to the best of his ability.

Johnny looked up from the page. “What happened to Andros?”

Harold had moved back to his desk chair. He peered over his glasses at Johnny. “We don’t know yet. We’re still searching for that part of the story.”

Johnny nodded thoughtfully. “And you got all this from the journal?”

“Not precisely,” said Harold. “The journal has been instrumental in verifying the authenticity of the story—”

“‘The *story*’?” Johnny interrupted. “This story? The one you’ve been researching?”

“Yes. All the names in the story are mentioned in the journal—Sir William, Sir Edward, Sir Gawain—”

Johnny felt a bubble of resentment and irritation well up in his chest, and he cut off Harold again. “So, you’re only having the journal translated to verify the research on *your* project?”

Harold fixed him with a steely gaze. “In part,” he said evenly, “but there are also other considerations—”

The bubble burst. Johnny stood and said, “Father, where is my journal?”

Harold’s eyebrows raised, and as his jaw clenched and his nostrils flared, he leaned back in his chair. “Back to ‘father,’ eh? Well, that is the third time you have interrupted your father, and your father is telling you: Don’t do it again.”

Johnny broke eye contact and breathed deep to try to calm himself. “Yes, sir. Now, would you please tell me where my journal is?”

Harold took a deep breath himself. “John, you’re going to have to stop behaving like a child about this. The journal is still being studied. It is an incredible artifact, as is the cloth, and both must be handled by professionals.”

A new chill went up Johnny’s spine. It took every ounce of his self-control not to blurt out, *The cloth? Are you going to confiscate that from me too?*

Harold must’ve read his mind—or his expression—again, for he quickly added, “Not that I have any intention of taking the cloth from you.”

At present, you mean, Johnny thought. But aloud and as composed as he could, he said, “I understand that these are valuable artifacts that need to be studied, sir, but when and where and by whom are decisions for *me* to make.”

Harold smirked. “You?”

"Yes, sir. They're my property."

"And in the six months they have been your property, you've lost the cloth *twice*."

"And gotten it back both times!"

Harold held up a hand. "Enough. I don't want to hear another word about your 'property.' You are my son, and what you seem to forget, young man, is that, as your father, *I* decide what you will and won't do and what happens to your 'property'! The only reason you even *have* 'property' is because I allow it!" Harold stopped himself. A look of regret blanketed his face, and he bowed his head and exhaled, but no apology was forthcoming.

Johnny felt as though he had been smashed by a wrecking ball. He clamped his jaw shut, willing himself to not respond, yet fixing his father with a blazing glare. Harold looked up, and when their eyes met, the regret disappeared, and he returned Johnny's glower with an icy stare of his own.

"This discussion is over," Harold said. "I invited you in here because I wanted to share information with you that I thought you could handle in the same manner as a man does. Obviously, I was wrong. The journal is still being studied, and you still have the cloth. For the time being, you'll have to be satisfied with that. I am now going to take your mother and sister on a nice stroll in an attempt to salvage what is left of the peace of this Lord's Day. You are welcome to join us, but if you do, I don't want to hear one word about any of this. Is that clear?"

Johnny swallowed hard. "Yes, sir."

"Will you be joining us?"

"No, sir."

"As you wish." Harold gathered the papers, replaced them in the envelope, and put it in his desk drawer. He then locked the drawer and pocketed the key. He stood, walked to the office door, and stopped. "You may go to your room," he said, facing the hallway.

Johnny reciprocated, exiting the Inner Sanctum without so much as a glance in his father's direction. Harold walked out and firmly closed and locked the office door.

Upstairs, Johnny heard his father gather Fiona and Charlie, and all of them leave the house. When he was certain they were well down the block, he raced downstairs to the shed and retrieved a hammer, a pry bar, and a large screwdriver. He also grabbed a large paper bag from the kitchen and then raced back up to his room. He knew he had little time.

Johnny cleared out the shoes from the back of his closet floor and used the tools to quickly pull up a few floorboards, taking great care not to split or crack any of them, exposing the space between the joists. Once this was accomplished, he went to the trunk, unlocked it, and retrieved the cloth. He folded it neatly, put it in the paper bag, and stuffed the bag down into the hole between the joists. He then replaced the floorboards, working to make them look like they did previously.

When he was satisfied that no one would suspect they were loose or there was something under them, he returned his shoes to the closet and closed the door. He then closed and locked the trunk. The joist space would have to do until he could find a more secure place for the cloth. At least if his father decided to break into the trunk and take the artifact, he wouldn't find it there.

Johnny quickly gathered the tools and put them back in the shed. He had just returned to his room when he heard the front door open and everyone file in. They all seemed in fine spirits, even Harold. Johnny felt a little better too, at least as good as he *could* feel considering he now knew the truth about something he never thought possible:

His father could not be trusted.

Chapter Seven

Johnny barely ate any supper that evening and said even less. When he finished cleaning his dishes, he went up to his room and tried to read, with little success. He finally went to bed, but sleep was elusive as well, and it was very late before he finally drifted off. He awoke Monday feeling groggy and stayed that way most of the morning.

He walked to school alone. Johnny and Emmy still seemed to be on the outs despite their weekend visit to Steve's. At school, the first thing he did was slip a note under Ben's locked workshop door, asking him about two things: (1) the recording components on his workbench, and (2) the status of Ben's mother. Johnny was careful not to even hint at anything involving Barrymore Banking and Trust. Johnny hoped that if the note worked and they talked, he could find a way to bring it up in the conversation.

The rest of the morning, his mind was on the cloth, the journal, and his father. Johnny barely heard any of the lessons in math, history, and science, and he only nibbled at his lunch, which he also ate alone. He worried that his father or even McDuff might sniff out the cloth's new hiding place. And he still fumed over the journal situation and his helplessness

to do anything about it.

But those weren't his only worries. He was also concerned about the whole Lazlo/Victor situation. No matter how sincere Victor may have seemed, Johnny was not at all certain that he was on the up-and-up and could be trusted. Their first tutoring session was after school. "I suppose I'll find out then," Johnny muttered.

The bell rang, and he headed to his worst class, P.E., and another round of that wretched game, basketball.

And Lazlo would be there.

Johnny had managed to avoid the gorilla in the rest of his classes, but he couldn't avoid him in gym. He'd have to be on the alert.

Johnny dressed out in his P.E. uniform and headed onto the main floor. He was the last one out of the locker room. The gym space was almost entirely taken up with side-by-side basketball courts, and it was filled with the usual buzz of student activity. On the near court, the girls were selecting teams for volleyball. On the far court, Lazlo, Wilson, and the rest of the goons had gathered.

Johnny headed across the first court, and as he did, a hush fell over the whole gym, the noisy buzz replaced by hissing whispers. All eyes turned to him, but his eyes fixed on Lazlo, who did not look happy. *Of course, he never looks happy unless he's beating up someone*, Johnny thought. But the big ape looked particularly unhappy today.

Johnny perceived the scene in slow motion. His steps echoed off the walls and pounded in his ears. He trudged toward the rack of basketballs at the far end of the room. But when he cleared the volleyball court, the world snapped back into real time when Lazlo's *basso profundo* boomed, "Hey, Whittaker!"

Johnny froze. Now even the whispers ceased. You could hear a pin drop. Johnny took a deep breath, slowly turned to face his adversary, and said, "What is it, Lazlo?"

Lazlo glanced around, scowled, and clomped forward quickly. Johnny had the momentary sensation of being in the path of a charging gorilla, but he willed himself to stay calm

and hold his ground. The closer Lazlo got, the deeper his scowl became, and lividity fairly poured out of his eyes. Johnny's body tensed and his muscles ached to adopt a karate stance, but he remained perfectly still. Lazlo strode right up to him and stopped, his face inches away from Johnny's, so close you could smell the baloney and cheese sandwich Lazlo had for lunch on his breath.

Lazlo rose up to his full height, towering over Johnny, and surveyed the gym. "I'm glad you're all watchin'," he snarled, "'cause I want you all to see this." He turned back to Johnny, who braced himself. The entire gym held its collective breath. Some of the younger girls looked away.

"Whittaker," Lazlo said through gritted teeth, "I'm . . . sorry!"

If the gym had had but one jaw, it would have clanged to the floor like a character in a cartoon. Johnny blinked several times, his eyes quickly scanning the gym, confirming that everyone was as surprised and confused as he was.

Wilson, utterly baffled, grunted a loud, "Whaaa?"

Lazlo looked at him. "That's right, Knox. You heard me. You *all* heard me! I'm apologizing!" He turned back to Johnny. "I'm sorry I smacked you in the face with a basketball last Friday, Whittaker, and for all the other mean things I've done to you too. Not only that, but I want everybody here to know that I promise not to be mean to you no more. And," he paused, swallowing, "I hope you can forgive me. Whaddya say?"

To Johnny's utter astonishment, Lazlo Farnsworth then held out his hand.

Johnny stared at the huge, rough meat hook, then back up at Lazlo's face, studying it closely. He still saw anger in the eyes, but there wasn't a hint of malice, deceit, or duplicity.

"C'mon, John," Lazlo said, keeping his voice low. "I know I don't deserve it, but don't leave me hangin'. Shake on it."

Johnny looked back down at the beefy mitt, certain that it could crush every bone in his hand. But Lazlo had asked for his forgiveness, and he knew he had no choice but to grant it. He steeled himself against the likely impending pain. "All

right, Lazlo." He held out his hand. "I accept your apology."

To Johnny's surprise, Lazlo proffered only a solid, decent grip and a firm shake.

The entire gym heaved a sigh of relief and then broke out in applause and cheers.

Lazlo's lips curled into what Johnny assumed was the closest thing to a friendly smile he could pull off, and Johnny grinned as well. They both looked at the cheering kids around them, and Johnny started to wave, when Lazlo, who hadn't let go of Johnny's hand, suddenly yanked him in close and whispered, "But I want you to know that if you don't help my brother and he ends up flunking out and can't be on the team, I'm going to pound you into dust. Clear?"

Johnny's grin faded. His Uncle David had always said if something seems too good to be true, it usually is. He replied, "That's up to your brother."

Lazlo said, "Maybe. But I'll *still* pound you." He mashed Johnny's hand, let it go, and walked back to Wilson and the goons.

Johnny winced, rubbed his sore hand, and shook it out. *I knew it,* he thought. *Victor's apology and promise isn't worth a hill of beans!* He started thinking of ways to cancel their first tutoring session that afternoon and all the others as well, when Coach Conrad's whistle pierced the air.

Tweeee! "All right, if you two are done makin' up, maybe we can get down to work!" *Tweeee!* "You girls start your volleyballin'! Knox, Farnsworth, you're team captains. Choose up sides! You first, Farnsworth!" *Tweeee!*

Lazlo looked straight at Johnny. "I pick Whittaker," he said and passed him the ball—not a screaming missile, but a decent bounce pass. Johnny caught it and moved to Lazlo's side, more wary than ever.

The game was quite civil, and for the first time Johnny understood how basketball could possibly be fun. He supposed not being slammed in the face with the ball, and actually paying attention to the game, had something to do

with it, but he didn't want to jump to any conclusions. Lazlo included him in most of the plays, and Johnny scored a couple of points thanks to Lazlo's screens and defense. Lazlo even protected Johnny from some of the more aggressive plays by Wilson's team. Johnny still wasn't sure he got all the fuss about basketball, but when Coach Conrad's shrill whistle signaled the end of the skirmish, he realized the game at least had helped him forget about the journal and the cloth for a while.

Tweeee! "All right, all right, all right!" the coach bellowed. "Good hustle! Glad you kept your head in the game today, Whittaker! Everyone put the balls back on the rack and hit the showers!" *Tweeee!*

Johnny wiped sweat from his brow with his shirtsleeve and looked around for any stray basketballs when one suddenly appeared in front of him. "Looking for this?" said a female voice. The ball slowly lowered to reveal a pair of the loveliest deep brown eyes Johnny had ever seen. They peered at him from a porcelain-skinned face with a perfect button nose and framed by curly, chestnut hair. She seemed to glow, and Johnny could almost believe the creature before him was nothing less than an angel.

He barely felt his arms reach out and take the ball from her. "Thank you," he croaked.

"You're welcome." She smiled, baring a mouth full of perfect, pearl-white teeth.

Johnny's stomach did a little flip.

"I thought it was really incredible how you stood up to that bully," the angel said.

"Y-you did?"

"Mm-hm. It was really brave."

Why couldn't he swallow? His mouth had gone completely dry. And his legs felt like Jell-O! All Johnny could manage was a pathetic, "Oh."

"But then," she went on, "I've heard that you do lots of brave things."

"Y-you have?"

She nodded. "Mm-hm. And that you're really smart, too."

Was it hot in here? He was sweaty from playing basketball, but this was a different kind of hot—a hot on the inside. Johnny managed a weak smile. “I don’t know about *really* smart.”

“You’re just being modest.” She batted her eyes, and Johnny was certain he was melting into the floor.

Tweeee! “Hey, you two!” Coach Conrad boomed from across the gym. “You waitin’ for a special invitation or somethin’? Get goin’!”

“Yes, Coach!” the angel called back sweetly. She turned back to Johnny. “See you around school, John!”

She started off, and he croaked, “Wait! What’s your name?”

She turned around and, walking backward, replied, “Lisa.”

He stepped forward, following her. “I’m John.”

She giggled. “I know. I just said your name, remember?” She gave him a little wave and another smile, then turned and ran into the girls’ locker room.

Johnny fairly floated across the floor. Lisa. What a lovely name! So cute and petite and wonderfully formed—a perfect name for the amazing creature who had just graced him with her presence.

WHAM!

This time, the ball hit him in the side of his head, and with far less force—not enough to knock him down, but still strong enough to produce a few stars. Johnny instantly heard uproarious laughter, and through the pain, he made out the figures of Wilson and his goons. “Think fast, Whittak-aaaaahh!”

Suddenly another, larger figure scattered the goons and grabbed Wilson by the shoulder in a vice grip. It was Lazlo. “Leave him alone, Knox!”

Wilson grimaced. “Hey, *I* didn’t promise not to hurt him!”

“Well, you’re promisin’ now! He’s under my protection, got it?” He squeezed the shoulder even harder.

“Okay! Okay!” Wilson cried. “I got it! C’mon, leggo! Aaaah!”

Lazlo squeezed one last time and then pushed Wilson into

the goons, like a bowling ball flying into the pins. They all scattered off, Wilson nursing his sore shoulder. Lazlo turned back to Johnny, pointed to his own eyes . . . and then at Johnny. He made a fist, then exited into the locker room.

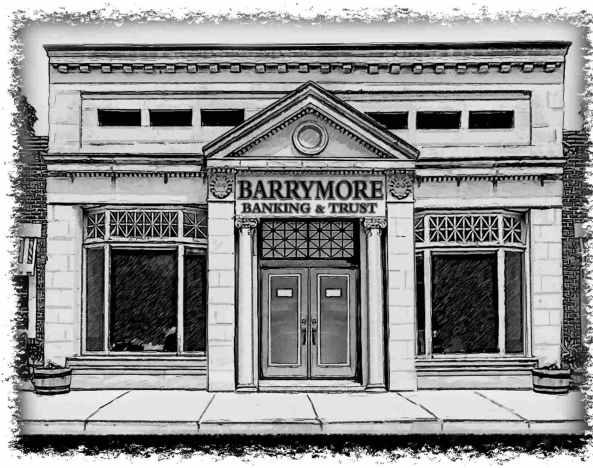
Johnny sighed. He didn't know whether to be grateful or concerned. He settled on a little of the former and a lot of the latter.

Once again, Johnny was the last one out of the locker room and to his final class of the day, English. The day had been a roller coaster of emotions—on the whole, negative. But then there was Lisa. He really hoped to see her again after school and purposed to look for her. Maybe they would walk home together, one last sweet climb before what he was sure would be the death plunge of tutoring Lazlo's brother.

But as Johnny sat down at his desk, Mrs. Wagner, the English teacher, handed him a note that would rob him of the sweet climb, though not really in a bad way. It simply read:

"Meet me in the workshop after school. Ben."

Chapter Eight



"You want my mama to be y'all's housekeeper?" Ben Huck paused loading his cleaning cart to shoot Johnny a quizzical look. He held one of his mops, one he called Sarepta, in his powerful hands.

Johnny suddenly wondered if his idea had been insulting. "Not a housekeeper, really, more of a helper for Fiona," he said.

"Does she want a helper?"

Johnny sort of half-shrugged. "She hasn't asked for one, and I don't think she ever would. But I can see how difficult things are for her, and how even everyday chores are weighing her down. She really needs help. I want to surprise her."

Ben put Sarepta in the cart. "But why *my* mama? I tol' you she works for a family in Tupelo. She's happy there. Why would she leave to come here?"

"Maybe she'd like a change," Johnny ventured. "Besides, I think she'd fit right in with us."

"What makes you say that? You don't know her!"

"I know *you*!" Johnny said. "I just want someone . . . I dunno . . . familiar."

Ben chortled. “Familiar?” He turned toward his storage shelf and began loading his arms with spray bottles filled with cleaning fluid. “Boy, you ain’t makin’ any sense! You never even *met* her!”

“She raised you, Ben. That makes her familiar. It almost makes her *family*. In my book, it’s the best recommendation she can have.”

Ben stopped and stood motionless for a few seconds. He then turned and looked at Johnny, his eyes brimmed with tears and deep gratitude. Johnny smiled sincerely at him, and then in an instant, the look on Ben’s face changed to one of guilt and shame. He quickly turned back to the storage shelves, cleared his throat, and continued working. “Well,” he said, his voice cracking slightly, “I don’t know if she’d wanna leave the folks in Tupelo, but they’s no harm askin’. I’ll call her tonight.”

“Thanks, Ben.”

The older man turned back to the cart, then stopped and gave Johnny another puzzled look. “Can y’all afford a housekeeper?”

Johnny nodded. “I’ll pay for it out of what I make tutoring Victor.”

Ben smiled. “Tha’s nice, boy,” he said kindly, “but what happens when the tutoring stops?”

“I’ll get another job,” Johnny replied. “Besides, I’m not sure it *will* stop.”

Ben arranged the spray bottles on the cart. “You may be right ’bout that. I hear that boy’s an athlete’s athlete. If he can deliver the T-R-T championship for Duke, whooo-wee! They be no stoppin’ him! He can write his own ticket!”

Johnny shook his head. “To be honest, I don’t get it. It’s just a basketball tournament. Why all the fuss?”

“Tobacco Road is a whole lot more than just a tournament to mos’ folks around here.”

“That’s what Coach Ira said.” Johnny took on the coach’s personality, pacing the floor and mimicking his voice. “‘T-R-T! The Tar Heels, the Wolfpack, the Demon Deacons, and the Blue Devils! A rivalry goin’ back to aught-five/aught-six!’”

Ben roared with laughter. “You got him down pretty good!”

Johnny dropped the caricature and climbed onto a stool. “Oh, he went on and on about the rivalry between the four universities, and how Duke always gets creamed, and how Victor can win it all for them. And that’s great for Duke, but __”

“Not just for Duke,” Ben interrupted. “It’s great for the whole region! People *loooove* sports, John, and they *loooove* sports heroes! You know why?”

“I have a feeling it has something to do with money,” Johnny replied with a frown.

“Now, why make that sound so distasteful?” Ben asked. “They’s nuthin’ wrong with people wantin’ to make money. They need it, the good Lord knows, and they can make a lot of it offa this.”

“Really?”

“Remember how big Constant Bullfinch Day was to Provenance?”

“Of course,” Johnny said, rolling his eyes. “How could I forget?”

“Well, Tobacco Road makes that look like a hotdog stand at a country picnic! Remember, this is four major universities from four cities! And if people got a hero to follow and root for? Boy oh boy, even if he ain’t on their team, tha’s gon’ be good for the whole region!” Ben opened the lid of a large nearby bin and retrieved a big handful of cleaning rags from it.

A thought popped into Johnny’s head, causing him to bolt upright. “Wait a minute. So, you’re telling me that the success of the Tobacco Road Tournament rests in a large part on the success of Duke . . . which rests on the success of Victor . . . whose involvement in the tournament rests on how well I can tutor him in science?”

Ben thought for a second, and then nodded. “Yep.” He sorted through the rags, selected a bright one and a dark one, tossed the rest back in the bin, and closed the lid. “Looks like you got yourself into the position of everybody countin’ on

you." He turned to Johnny and smirked. "Again."

Johnny slumped. "So, no pressure or anything." He groaned. "Why do I keep doing this to myself?"

Ben patted him on the shoulder. "Just do your best, son. Tha's all anyone can do, right? And your best is a whole lot better than most people's." He folded the rags and tucked them in the cart.

Johnny smiled. He liked this conversation. It had been a while since he and Ben had talked like this. In the back of his mind, Johnny wondered if he should bring up the bank-alarm situation and was just about to when Ben turned and faced him again. "Now, what's all this about some recordin' project you cookin' up? Sounds interestin'!"

"Oh! Right!" Johnny hopped off the stool. "It's an idea I have to help Steve Mangle!" He briefly explained what happened on Saturday at Steve's house and how Steve refused to even try to see himself being part of any adventures. Then he revealed the experience of the pastor's sermon slides on Sunday. As he talked, Johnny and Ben exchanged places, with Ben sitting on the stool while Johnny walked around the workshop, getting more and more animated.

"What I'd like to do is combine the slides with sound and maybe even taste, touch, and smell to create a completely active experience involving all five senses that makes people feel like they're really *there*—in the adventure! I'll call it the Sense Multiplier! Oh! Or the Imagination Enhancer! Whaddya think?"

Ben crossed his arms. "I don' like it."

Johnny blinked, surprised. "Why not?"

"It's too bland. You need somethin' with mo' pep in it."

"Not the *name*! What do you think about the *idea*?"

"Oh!" Ben exclaimed. He scratched his head. "Well, I think . . . it's one of the most incredible things I ever heard! Where do you come up with stuff, boy?"

"I dunno," Johnny said with a shrug and a grin. "I really just want to help Steve experience great adventures!"

Ben pointed to his workbench. "You mentioned them recording heads and tape there in your note. You reckon they

can help out?"

"Maybe? What do you think?"

Ben stroked his chin thoughtfully and rose from the stool. "Well, we'll have to build the rest of the recordin' machine, o'course, and it'll have to be able to record and play back—"

"I think all the specs for it are in one of the tech journals you loaned me!" Johnny interjected.

"I believe you're right. And we'll have to put speakers all around to make it feel like you's in the middle of everythin'."

"So, we can do it?" Johnny asked.

Now Ben grinned. "It's gon' take a lotta work."

Johnny felt like jumping for joy. "Great! Where do we start?"

Ben's brow furrowed. "Now hold on—ain't you got someplace to be?"

Johnny quickly checked the wall clock hanging above Ben's workbench. Three twenty. "Not yet! My tutoring session doesn't start until four thirty. I've got time!"

"But *I* don't," Ben replied. "I need to git to work."

Johnny deflated a bit. "Oh! Right! Well, we'll start tomorrow after school. No, wait. I have a tutoring session then, too. And on Wednesday, Thursday, and Friday, too! Rats!"

Ben chuckled. "We'll find time. We can always work at lunch."

"Yes! Lunch! Great!" Johnny grabbed his bookbag. "I guess I should go get ready for Victor." He frowned. "I sure hope this works out."

"Don't you worry 'bout that," Ben said. "You'll do good. You always seem to."

"Tell my parents that," Johnny scoffed, but then added sincerely, "Thanks, Ben."

Ben nodded.

Suddenly, that nagging feeling Johnny had on the way home from Steve's last Saturday returned, and the words "Barrymore Bank" popped into his mind. Could that be it? Anyway, the moment seemed right for broaching the subject, so he took the chance. "Speaking of doing the right thing—"

Ben stiffened and cut him off. “Now, you stop right there. If you’re gonna ask me about gettin’ involved with the alarm and the bank situation, the answer is no.”

“I want to make it right!”

Ben held up a hand. “You ain’t hearin’ me, boy! I don’t wanna talk about this! Just leave it lie!” He stepped back to his cart, loaded up the last of his cleaning supplies, and rolled it toward the door.

Johnny walked alongside him. “I understand, but there’s something you don’t realize!”

“I’m serious, John. People are startin’ to calm down about that now, and the police are still investigatin’. So, until they have somethin’ solid, we need to let it alone.”

“But I have to tell you—”

“You best be gettin’ on to your session now. And I best be gettin’ to work!” He pushed the cart past Johnny and out the door.

Johnny followed. “Hold on, Ben, just for a second—”

“I’m not listenin’!” He headed toward the service elevator.

“It was my fault!”

Ben stopped. Johnny’s words echoed in the empty passageway. Ben slowly turned to face him. “Your fault? What you talkin’ ’bout?”

Johnny inhaled. “The Friday before the bank was robbed, I was in Hoops Diner with my family. Arrie, the waitress, told me she was in the bank that morning when the alarm went off. She said it stayed on for a long time. I thought it may have been a short in the electrical system, so I told her it makes sense that it would take a while to stop the alarm because . . .” Johnny swallowed hard, “. . . because the main power shutoff is in the basement.”

Ben said nothing, just stared at him, poker-faced.

Johnny went on. “I didn’t know then that Arrie was part of the gang that robbed Barrymore Bank.” His mouth went dry. “I basically told her how to shut off the alarm.” He took a step forward and started to reach out, then stopped and closed his hand. “Ben, I’m sorry! I’m so sorry! I wasn’t thinking! I know people have been mad at you about the alarm, and I

want to make it right!"

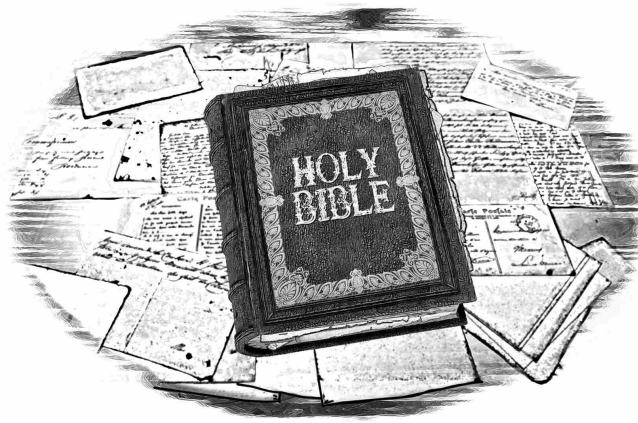
Ben still hadn't moved. Johnny couldn't tell what he was feeling—he had turned stone-faced. He wished Ben would start yelling at him; it would make him feel so much better!

Finally, after a long pause, Ben slowly lowered his head, took a deep breath, and nodded. "Okay, boy," he said softly. "Okay. I'm glad you tol' me. That took a lotta courage . . . and I'm proud of you. And I forgive you."

Ben raised his head, and his face seemed engraved with sadness. Johnny felt tears welling up in his eyes, and he clenched his jaw to stop them from spilling out. He took another step toward his friend, but Ben held up a hand, stopping him in his tracks. "Now, let's talk no mo' 'bout this. It's over and done with. No need to bring it up again. Ever. Unnerstood?"

Without waiting for an answer, Ben turned back to his cart, pushed it forward, and disappeared into the service elevator, leaving Johnny behind.

Chapter Nine



"Well, this is *not* how I wanted to go into my first tutoring session," Johnny muttered as he exited the school. The talk with Ben had drained him emotionally. And to make matters worse, the nagging feeling not only hadn't gone away, but it had intensified.

He had an hour before his tutoring session with Victor began, so he decided to swing by Steve's home to check in on him. That's where the nagging feeling had started; maybe returning there would help him remember what it was that he'd forgotten. He desperately hoped the feeling didn't mean Steve might not last much longer, but if it did, then he wanted to spend as much time with his friend as possible.

When Johnny walked into Steve's room, he was sitting in his chair, eyes closed, leaning back. Johnny wondered whether he was sleeping, thinking, or was he . . .

"Steve?" he whispered.

After a pause long enough to make Johnny's heart race, Steve answered, "Yup."

Johnny heaved a huge sigh of relief. "Did I wake you? I can leave if—"

"No, just checking for holes in my eyelids," Steve said,

opening them. “None yet, but you never know when one might pop.” He grinned. “How was school?”

“Well, Knox is still a twit, and apparently I’m under Lazlo Farnsworth’s protection now, though it feels a lot more like a threat.”

“What? How’d *that* happen?” said Steve, bemused.

“It’s a long story,” Johnny replied, waving him off.

“Is it because you’re tutoring his brother?”

Johnny blinked. “I guess it’s not so long after all. Yeah! How’d you know?”

Steve affected a superior look. “I have my sources. When do you start?”

“In a little less than an hour. The catch is, if Victor doesn’t do well, Lazlo’s gonna pound me into dust.” Johnny grimaced, and then his face changed completely. “But something really nice happened today too. I met a new,” he sighed, “wonderful person.”

Steve winced. “Don’t tell me you’ve got a crush on a girl.”

Johnny tried with all his might to quench his beaming smile, to no effect. “She’s really pretty.”

Steve’s eyes rolled like marbles on glass. “Ugh, you dolt! You’re under her spell, aren’t you?”

“I don’t know about that, but her name is Lisa, and she talked to me! At least, I think she did. I was kind of in a fog at the time. Especially when she fluttered her eyelashes. She has *really* long eyelashes. I mean, they’re so long that when she batted them, I felt the air moving! And her eyes are this amazing shade of brown! Not the normal, boring, dull brown, but a hypnotizing caramel hue that sucks you in and won’t let go. She has long, curly, chestnut hair, and she *smells* good too! Even in P.E. class! I don’t remember what I said to her. I think it was something about a basketball—but, wow! And when I say ‘wow,’ I mean *WOW*!”

“I may vomit,” Steve said. “Good grief! You’re totally smitten. I’m afraid it’s hopeless. You poor boy.”

Johnny sat down on the edge of Steve’s bed. “I’m not sure what she sees in me, but with that one smile and the air from those eyelashes whipping in my hair, she erased every

thought I've ever had of girls having cooties. Lisa's a real pip."

"More like a dumb Dora if you ask me."

Although Steve was teasing, Johnny could see that something wasn't right with him. Steve's eyes had faded into a dim languor, his face appeared ashen, and his voice sounded weak and frail. Johnny considered asking him how he felt but doing so would be an exercise in futility. Steve rarely admitted how much he suffered.

And the nagging feeling got worse.

Still, Johnny carried on talking about the wonders and joys of the paragon of loveliness known as Lisa, as much for himself as for Steve, talking faster and faster, hoping that something he said would finally trigger his brain into remembering.

And suddenly the moment came—unexpectedly, as do most moments of this nature. And not through any of his waterfall of words but through something Steve interjected when Johnny paused for breath: "Any girl dopey enough to talk to you is either desperate, or a missionary, or a desperate missionary."

Johnny chuckled, and then it hit him.

Missionaries.

They spread the Good News—the gospel of Jesus.

That was it. *That's* what he had forgotten. But the relief, release, and nagging were all instantly replaced by severe conviction. Johnny was a child of God now, a Christian. His most important task was to share the Good News of Jesus, a task given to him by Jesus Himself. It was so simple, so obvious—and Johnny had forgotten all about it.

He noticed his stream of words had stopped, and Steve had apparently noticed it, too, as he was looking at Johnny quizzically. "You okay there, goofball? Or did you just run out of words?"

Johnny opened his mouth, then snapped it back shut. He had never done this before, and he was suddenly unsure about what exactly to say—an unfamiliar condition for him. *God, help me out here*, he thought. He said aloud, "Yeah, uh, I was thinking about what you just said."

“About your girlfriend being desperate? Hey, I call ’em like I see ’em.”

Johnny chuckled. “No, not the ‘desperate’ part. I mean, she *may* be, but that’s not what I was thinking about. I was thinking about the ‘missionary’ part.”

Steve’s brow furrowed. “Why?”

Johnny coughed. “Well, the truth is . . . I don’t *need* a visit from a missionary. Missionaries travel around to tell people that they need God. But, well, I’m already following God.”

“Yeah? Since when?”

“Since a few weeks before Christmas, before you went into the hospital.”

“Wait—you were a Christian when you came to pick up the Christmas cards I drew?”

“Yes.”

“Why didn’t you tell me then?”

Johnny’s cheeks turned bright red. He lowered his eyes. “I dunno. I should have. I should have told you last Saturday, too, you and Paul and your folks.” He looked up at Steve. “But I’m telling you now. God has forgiven me of all my sins. I feel like a new person. Different. It’s weird . . . and wonderful.”

Steve turned sullen. “Sounds like you’re the *real* missionary. Come to preach at me, have you? To tell me how much God loves me?”

Johnny hesitated. “Well, yeah! I mean, you mentioned God a while back, so I wasn’t sure whether you were already a Christian. But either way, I’m just excited by it all, and I wanted to share that with you.”

Steve’s head drooped, and he stared at his immobile legs. He hacked a phlegmy cough, but even it had little force. All was still for a few seconds, and then Steve said, “Someone told me once that God has plans for everyone, including me. That He made me this way for some reason. That it wasn’t a mistake, but His love.”

“Yeah, that’s kind of what you said before. So, you *do* believe?” Johnny asked softly.

“No. I just quote the line so people don’t feel sorry for me. Not that it makes a difference. Everyone pities the crippled

kid."

"I don't pity you," Johnny replied. "And what if it's true? What if God *does* make all of us different with different strengths and weaknesses so that we can help others going through the same kinds of troubles we have?"

Steve looked at Johnny as though he were incredibly naïve. "First, I've never met anybody else with muscular dystrophy. And second, how can I help anyone when I can't even help myself? I can't eat at the kitchen table 'cause I can't sit on those kinds of chairs without falling off. I can't go to bed without being carried there. I can't wash my own face or brush my own teeth or even go to the bathroom without someone helping me. Does that sound like God's love to you?"

"I . . . don't know," Johnny said in a quiet voice.

"No, you don't," Steve snapped. "No one does." He sighed. "Listen, I'm glad you found God, or He found you, or however it works. But the truth is, I don't think God has been looking for me or has any use for me, so you might wanna find a different mission field."

Steve returned to his reclined position and closed his eyes again. "You better go. You don't wanna be late for your first tutoring session."

Johnny didn't know what to say. He rose and headed for the door. He looked back at his frail friend for a long moment, and then exited the Mangle house.

This is definitely *not how I wanted to go into my first tutoring session*, he thought, heading for his own home. *Lord, what went wrong? I know You wanted me to talk with him about You, so why didn't it work?*

Johnny strode on in silence, his footsteps keeping rhythm with his pulse, his thoughts racing. It wasn't so long ago that he would have felt the same way about faith and belief as Steve did just now. And while Johnny was gratified that he no longer felt that way, he was heartsick that Steve did. Maybe words aren't enough to reach some people. Maybe some people need more.

Suddenly, the imagination enhancer project popped back into his mind. "Yes!" Johnny exclaimed aloud. Once again,

the Lord had provided an answer even before he knew he needed one. And now, that project took on a new and even greater importance. He and Ben would need to make it a reality for Steve, not just so Steve could participate in adventures, but also so it could somehow, some way, help him be part of the grandest and most important adventure of all: life with Jesus Christ!

"Now *that* is the way to go into a tutoring session!" Johnny said, and he fairly flew the rest of the way home.

Chapter Ten

The euphoria Johnny felt at the prospect of helping Steve gave way quickly to apprehension when Victor arrived at the Whittaker home for their first session, and not just because of Lazlo's threat. This was the first time Johnny had ever done something like this, and he wanted to do a good job. But he remained uncertain that Victor was any better of a person than his little brother.

Partway into the session, though, his concerns faded. Victor was actually nice, polite, attentive, conscientious, and friendly. He also seemed to be genuinely interested in learning, much to Johnny's surprise.

Unfortunately, Victor was also thick as a rock when it came to science.

Johnny decided to begin with chemistry. "I have your lesson plan from the course," he told Victor, "and it says one of the things you need to know is the Periodic Table of Elements."

"Right," said Victor. "Uh, what is that again exactly?"

"It's a list of all the elements that make up everything around us," Johnny replied.

"Riiight!" Victor nodded vigorously. "And what are

elements again?"

"They're the molecular materials that make up earth and air and water and fire and everything else the physical universe consists of. You know what molecules are, right?"

"Um, those brown spots on your skin?"

Johnny blinked. "Those are moles."

"Riiight."

Johnny sighed. This was going to take a lot of work.

By the end of the session, Victor seemed to have made some progress. They had gone over the first two rows of the Table of Elements repeatedly. Victor wrote them down three times—their atomic numbers, which is the number of protons in the element; the number of electrons, which is the same as the number of protons; and the number of neutrons, which is the mass number minus the atomic number. They also went over how to find the mass number, which was a bit complicated, but which Victor appeared to figure out with ease.

As Victor drove away, Johnny was confident that, though it wouldn't be easy, he could get Victor where he needed to be to pass his first test.

Until the next day's session.

Victor didn't remember a thing from the first session. Every question Johnny asked was met with either a blank stare or an apologetic shrug. They ended up spending the whole session going over the same material as the previous day. *At least he'll get it* this *time*, Johnny thought.

But he didn't.

Wednesday's session was just as bad as Tuesday's, and Thursday's was just as bad as Wednesday's. In fact, each session was worse than the one before. No matter how much they went over the material, no matter how much Johnny drilled the knowledge into Victor's head, and no matter how confident Victor was when the session ended, when the next one began, Victor had forgotten everything from the previous session.

It wasn't that Victor didn't work hard; he did, maybe harder than anyone Johnny had ever seen. It just didn't do

any good. He had some sort of mental block against retaining even the most basic scientific knowledge.

Victor was getting discouraged, and so was Johnny. Lazlo's threatening looks were increasing. What's more, even though the tutoring sessions were supposed to be secret, word had somehow gotten around school that Johnny was tutoring Victor and not doing a very good job, which meant that even the teachers were noticeably cooler toward Johnny.

It wasn't difficult to discern who the blabbermouth was—all anyone had to do was listen to Wilson Knox. Every time he saw Johnny, he instantly turned into a town crier, proclaiming loudly to everyone within earshot: "I knew you couldn't do it, Whittaker! Everyone around here knows the Farnsworths are nothin' but beefy dolts—all of 'em! You'd have a better chance of teachin' science to a cow than to Victor. You always act like the big Abercrombie, gettin' everyone's hopes up, gonna save the day! Then when push comes to shove, you got squat, nada, zilch! You're nothin' but a big flopperoo!"

Of course, Wilson was very careful not to say any of this when Lazlo was around.

Johnny hadn't had a chance to talk with Ben about any of this, or to work with him on the Sensory Multiplier project. (He really needed to get the right name for that thing!) It seemed as though Ben was back to avoiding him. He was "too busy" to meet at lunch or after school.

But while Johnny could kind of understand Ben's reluctance, he couldn't understand Emmy's almost complete indifference. When he tried to talk to her over lunch and on their walks home about his conundrum with Victor, she could not seem less interested. At lunch on Thursday, she doodled in her notebook while he updated her on Victor's lack of progress.

"His test is just a week away," he fretted. "And if he doesn't pass it, he won't be able to play in the first game the following Saturday." He paused. Emmy kept writing. Johnny watched her in silence. After a few moments, she stopped and looked up, as though just realizing he wasn't talking anymore.

He frowned and said, “So what do you think I should do?”

She blinked. “Oh, uh, I wasn’t really listening.”

“No kidding.”

Emmy shrugged. “Sorry.”

But he got the feeling she wasn’t sorry at all. “Emmy, what’s going on?”

“With what?”

“With us! You’re cold and you don’t listen to me, even when I need your help! Are you still upset with me about Constant Bullfinch Day?”

She shook her head. “No.”

“Then what is it? You act like you don’t even want to be around me anymore.”

“Oh, don’t be silly. I’ve just been thinking about other things, that’s all.”

“Other things? Like what?”

“Just . . . things.” She put her notebook in her bag. “I know you’ll find this hard to believe, but you don’t take up my every waking thought.”

Johnny scowled. “I didn’t think I did. But I’d like to at least be *among* your thoughts when I’m talking to you!”

Emmy leaned forward and said curtly, “You want someone to talk to?” She motioned with her head behind him. “Here comes Lisa. Talk with her!”

As she got up to leave, her bag slipped from her hands and fell to the floor. It opened, and several items fell out—one being the picture of Al, the detective. Emmy grabbed the bag, shoved the strewn items back inside, and marched off. Johnny was amused by her private little crush, though for a girl “in love,” she sure didn’t seem all that happy.

Johnny watched Emmy exit the cafeteria, and then something mysteriously pulled his gaze in the opposite direction. The angelic form of Lisa headed toward him. He sat back in his chair and grinned uncontrollably.

“Hi, John.”

The sound of her pure voice made his heart flutter and his stomach somersault like an acrobat. Truth be told, she had been the only nice thing that happened to him that week. Her

perfect smile and little waves throughout the day momentarily distracted him from his troubles.

"Is everything all right?" Lisa slid into the chair next to him, and Johnny melted inside.

"Oh, uh, yeah," he stammered, "everything's fine."

"Are you sure?" Her voice was like silk. "You look worried."

He kind of wished Emmy were still there so he could tell her, *"See how easy it is to pay attention to people?"* But aloud he said, "Yeah, I guess I am a little worried."

"What about?"

He repeated to Lisa what he had told Emmy about his Victor problem. She looked at him the whole time he talked, hanging on his every word.

When he had finished, Lisa put her hand on his arm (he thought his heart would burst out of his chest!) and said, "There's no need to worry. Don't listen to Wilson or Lazlo or anybody else. I know you can help Victor. I know you *will* help him! You'll figure it out. You're so smart!"

Johnny smiled, but at that moment, he didn't feel smart at all—more like a babbling idiot. He was also a smidge uncomfortable by Lisa's attention—not that he didn't also like it. He did. A lot.

She looked into his eyes coyly. "When you help Victor pass his test, maybe the two of us can go to his first game together?"

Johnny gulped. Did she just say she wanted to go on a date? Were they even old enough to date? He was pretty sure they weren't, but his mouth began moving, and words started spilling out. "Uh, yeah! Love to. That sounds like fun!" Then he realized that they'd be watching a basketball game, which didn't sound fun to him at all. Still, he'd be with Lisa. She could make a landfill worth attending.

The bell rang. Lisa reached over, squeezed his hand, and said, "I'll see you in gym class, 'kay?"

Johnny—vacant from his body—echoed, "Okay."

Then she rose and floated out of the room. Johnny's knees felt so weak after her touch, he wasn't sure he could stand up.

Then it struck him. *She wants to go to the game. After Victor passes the test!* He simply *had* to help Victor pass, no matter what it took!

The next tutoring session was the following day, Friday, at Duke this time. Harold drove Johnny there, and as Johnny walked down the hall to Victor's dorm room, he ran into a familiar face.

"Hey there, young Whittaker!"

"Oh, hi, Coach Naismith."

"Please, call me Coach Ira! Victor'll be over in a few minutes. I wanted to talk to ya' afore your session today."

"What about?"

Coach Ira looked around and lowered his voice. "I understand things ain't goin' too well."

Johnny shrugged slightly. "It's been a challenge, but we've made some progress."

Coach Ira smirked. "Don't kid a kidder, son. Victor's a top-notch b-ball player, but he's no brain. He needs help. You *both* need it."

Johnny's eyes narrowed. "Just what kind of help are you talking about?"

The coach once again looked around, then pulled a paper out of his jacket. "I happened to get an advance copy of the test," he whispered. "Complete with the answers. Here." He held out the paper.

Johnny's forehead puckered, and his mouth gaped. He couldn't believe what he was hearing. He willed himself to not even glance at the paper, but instead keep his eyes fixed squarely on the coach. "Are you saying that you want me to help Victor cheat?"

Coach Ira instantly rubbernecked the hall and put his fingers to his lips. "Shh! No, no, not cheat," he said in a nervous whisper. "Just . . . give him an edge, ya know? 'Cause we both know he can't pass without it. And we *really* need him to pass the test!"

Johnny shook his head. "I think Victor can and will pass,

and all on his own. I'm surprised you don't have more faith in him."

"I have lotsa faith in him on the court, just—"

A voice from behind him cut in, "Just not in the classroom, eh, Coach?"

Coach Ira whipped around. "Victor! Now listen, son, I'm only trying to help ya!"

Victor scowled. "No, not me. You're trying to help *you*. You wanna win so much, you'll even do something like this!"

"Victor—"

"Shame on you, Coach. It's bad enough that you want me to cheat. It's even worse that you want Johnny to help me cheat. Shame on you."

Coach Ira slowly lowered the hand holding the test and bowed his head. "You better leave, Coach," Johnny said in a quiet tone, "before someone else sees you try to hand me that test."

The coach looked around one more time, startled at the thought. "Right! I—I'm sorry, both of you. I—I'll destroy this test, and we'll just forget this ever happened, all right?"

"Bye, Coach," Johnny said. Victor said nothing.

Coach Ira stuffed the test back in his coat pocket. "I'll see you at practice, Victor." He looked around furtively once more, then hotfooted it out of the dorm.

"He's right," Victor murmured.

"No, he's not."

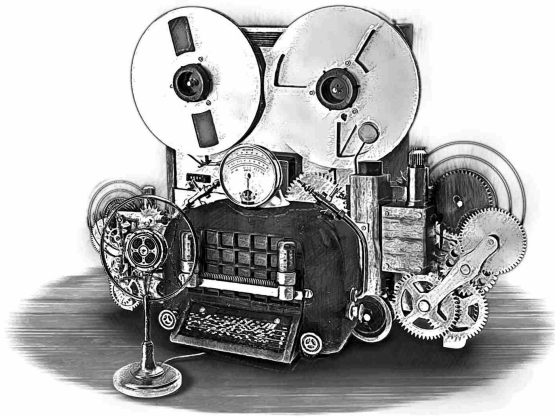
Victor sighed. "You're a nice kid, Johnny, but yeah, he is. You shoulda taken that test." He walked to his room and stopped at the door. "Listen, I don't really feel like a tutoring session this afternoon."

"Victor—"

"See you around, kid."

Victor went into his room and closed the door behind him.

Chapter Eleven



Johnny was out of sorts all weekend. Even his daydreams of Lisa didn't help. Well, not much.

Church on Sunday eased his mind for the morning, but by afternoon he was back to brooding. He knew now that Victor was not like Lazlo, that he was on the level and really did want to learn. He also knew that Victor's coach—the very person who was supposed to be the most encouraging—only cared about winning. Johnny wanted to help Victor more than ever, but now, more than ever, he wasn't sure that was possible.

Monday morning brought a pleasant surprise though: another note from Ben, wanting to meet at lunch. Johnny muscled through his morning classes and then bolted down to the basement workshop as soon as the lunch bell rang.

Ben was waiting for him with a second pleasant surprise! "I heard back from my mama." Ben held up her letter. "She wants to do it."

Johnny smiled. "Really? That's great!"

"You coulda knocked me over with a feather when I read this. I never thought it possible."

"Did she say why?"

“Nuthin’ specific. Jus’ that . . . lessee.” He consulted the letter. “She say, ‘Your letter couldn’t have arrived at a better time. I’ve been thinking lately about making a change. I believe the Lord has put it on my heart.’”

“Wow!” Once again, Johnny stood in awe of God’s mysterious ways. “So, when is she coming?”

Ben’s eyes darted down the page. “She says Easter week. That’s spring shutdown.”

Johnny’s brow furrowed. “When is that this year?”

Ben chuckled. “You probably the only kid in this school who don’t know when spring shutdown is. It’s the firs’ week of April.”

Johnny shrugged. “I prefer learning, what can I say?” Suddenly, a new thought occurred. “Uh-oh.”

“What?”

Johnny’s eyes widened. “I haven’t told my parents about this yet!”

Ben frowned. “Well now, don’t you think tha’s somethin’ you mighta tol’ me afore I invited my mama here?”

“I’m sorry, Ben! I—I forgot!”

Ben smirked. “I know what’s got your mind in a twist. You been doin’ too much pinin’ after that Lisa girl.”

Johnny’s face instantly reddened. “I’m not pining! I’m just —Lisa and I are—she’s . . . How do you know about that, anyway?”

“Boy, I got eyes, ain’t I? I seen you floatin’ around her like she was the sun and all!” Ben leaned in. “Can’t say as I blame ya. She’s cute as a bug’s ear!” His eyes twinkled, and he started laughing. Johnny joined in.

When the laughter tapered off, Johnny sighed and said, “Yeah, she is,” which just got Ben going again. Johnny’s face shone redder than ever.

“How’s Emmy feel about this?” Ben asked.

Johnny shrugged. “Emmy and I aren’t really talking much these days.”

“Oh,” said Ben knowingly.

“No, no, it’s nothing like that. Emmy has her own love interest is all.”

"Ah-ha! An' how *you* feel about *that*?"

Johnny shook his head. "I told you, we're not like that. Emmy and I are good friends—pals!"

"Who ain't talkin' to each other."

"Yeah, but that was happening *before* Lisa." Johnny shook off the whole conversation. "I don't wanna talk about that. I'll tell my folks about your mama coming, okay? Don't worry."

Ben smiled. "I ain't worried. I always like seein' my mama."

He turned back to his workbench and started putting away tools, and Johnny noticed for the first time since he came in that there was something on the bench, covered with a cloth. "What's that?" he asked.

Ben didn't turn but responded, "Oh! That's the other reason I wanted to see you. Take a look."

Johnny moved to the bench, gently removed the cloth, and his jaw dropped at what he saw, his third pleasant surprise. The object appeared to be a good-sized, flat, rectangular box, set on its side. Attached to the front were two wooden arms, jutting out from the box to make a V. Each arm had a metal spindle on its end. Connected to each spindle was a thin metal film reel, wound with what appeared to be the cellophane recording tape Johnny had seen on the bench a few weeks ago. The tape was threaded from one reel, along the face of the box, over what Johnny recognized were the recording elements, and onto the other film reel. Under the recording elements were a series of switches.

"I can't believe it!" Johnny said. "Is this the recording box? You actually made it?"

Ben smiled. "You see it there, don'tcha?"

"And it actually works?"

Ben's brow furrowed. "Now, whatchu think?" He reached over and flipped one of the switches.

The box sprang to life, the reels spinning slowly, the tape moving smoothly over the recording elements. Ben's voice emerged from a nearby speaker, attached by a cable to the back of the recording box. *"I pledge allegiance to the flag of the United States of America, and to the Republic for which it stands,*

one nation indivisible, with liberty and justice for all." There were lots of small pops and crackles, but the voice was there, clear as day.

"That's amazing!" Johnny exclaimed.

Ben shut off the recorder and smiled. "Yeah, it came out nice if I do say so m'self. That there's the playback switch. Down is to play, up to stop. This one's the record switch. Like playback, down records, up stops it. They's a microphone attached to the back of the recorder with another cable. You press record down, talk into the mic, and when you're done, switch it up. You gotta rewind the reels by hand, but then you jus' play it back! Give her a try!"

Johnny grabbed the mic, pressed record, and in his best Groucho Marx voice said, "The other morning I shot an elephant in my pajamas. How he got in my pajamas, I'll never know." He flipped up the record switch, and the machine stopped.

Ben chuckled and rewound the reels by hand to the right spot.

Johnny pressed the playback switch, and from the speaker came his Groucho impersonation! *"The other morning I shot an elephant in my pajamas. How he got in my pajamas, I'll never know."*

He hooted with laughter, his face beaming. "This is fantastic, Ben! It's gonna be so great when we get all the other imagination enhancer elements together! I really think it's gonna help Steve!" Then he felt a flickering moment of regret that the first thing he recorded wasn't a Bible verse. "How do you do it?"

"Do what?"

"*This!* Make stuff!"

"Same way as you do," Ben replied.

"But how do you *know* how to do it? I know how from watching *you*!"

Ben put the cloth back on the recording box. "That ain't the *only* way you know."

"No, I also read a lot."

"So do I."

"But is that all? Did you go to school?"

Ben shook his head. "A little. My whatcha call 'formal schoolin' stopped at the fifth grade. That's when Daddy left the firs' time. I hadda go to work to support Mama an' me. I didn't mind, but Mama shore did. She was always a great one for encouragin' me to learn, an' for teachin' me, even though she had less schoolin' than I did." He smiled at the memory.

"She never let me quit," Ben continued. "She used to say, 'If you don't get what they tryin' to tell you, then you figure it in a way you can unnerstand.' Tha's how she remembered things, and tha's how I do too." He looked thoughtful for a moment, and then said, "Mebbe tha's what you need to do with Victor."

Johnny's brows snapped together. Ben had just given him a key to his most pressing problem. His mind began filtering a flood of incoming ideas. None of them was great, but eventually one would rise to the top.

The bell rang, and lunchtime was over. Johnny grabbed his bookbag and looked at his friend. "Thanks, Ben," he said warmly.

Ben smiled. "We still gots lots more work to do, but at least we on our way! See you at lunch tomorrow."

Johnny nodded enthusiastically and headed out the door.

Gym class droned on like a gloomy day. More basketball, only this time, Coach Conrad tried to teach them about plays. They all sat on the gym floor while Coach drew *X*s and *O*s on a portable chalkboard, blathering on and on. "Here's the key man, in the center. Here are his guys around him, and of course, each of these men will be guarded by members of the other team. The center can pass to any of his team members, and they can all pass to each other around him." The coach drew the arc of the passes, creating a big circle.

Johnny, bored silly up to that point, suddenly sat upright.

The diagram looked oddly familiar. It reminded him of something—what *was* it? He stared hard at the chalkboard, willing himself to remember. The circle . . . the man at the center . . . his teammates revolving around him . . . all guarded by opposing team members . . .

It hit him. “Wow!” he shouted, his voice echoing off the gym walls and startling his classmates.

Coach Conrad glared at him. “You got somethin’ to add, Whittaker?”

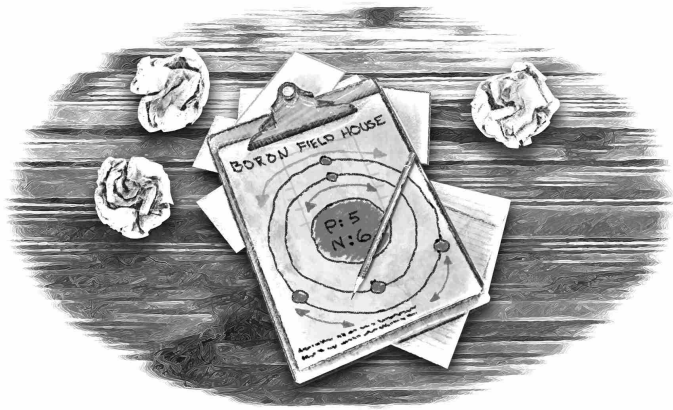
Johnny realized everyone was looking at him. “Uh, no, Coach, just, uh, your diagram, it’s great!”

“Glad you approve. Mind if I continue with it now?”

“No, sir.” Johnny smiled weakly. “Sorry.”

Lazlo looked at him as if he were nuts, and Wilson and his goons snickered. Johnny didn’t care. Sometimes, the best ideas come from combining varying concepts into one cohesive formula. This time, the trifecta of Ben, Ben’s mom, and a boring basketball speech gave Johnny the perfect plan.

Chapter Twelve



When Victor showed up at the Whittaker home that afternoon, Johnny didn't even say hello. He launched right into the session with a seemingly odd question: "Does Coach Ira run plays?"

"What?"

"For you and your team. Does Coach Ira run plays for you?"

"Uh, sure! Lots of 'em!"

"Does he draw diagrams of them? On a chalkboard?"

Victor nodded. "Yeah."

Johnny pulled out a piece of paper. "Like this?" On the paper was Johnny's reproduction of Coach Conrad's diagram from gym class.

Victor nodded again. "Yeah, for the most part." He pointed. "That's the center; these are his teammates; these are the guys on the opposite team; looks like they're goin' 'around the world'—passing the ball from player to player to see if one of them can get a clear shot."

"Right!" Johnny exclaimed. "Good! Now, this game is being played in a place called Boron Field House."

Victor frowned. "Never heard of it."

"Does that matter?"

"Nope. Just a strange name, that's all."

"But one you'd remember if you played there?" Johnny asked.

Victor grinned. "With a name like that? Oh, yeah."

Johnny set the diagram on the table and pulled out a clean sheet of paper and a pencil and handed them to Victor. "Boron Field House is the homecourt of a team called the Pros." He pointed to the paper. "Write that down."

Victor chuckled. "Don't think much of themselves, do they?" He wrote "Pros" at the top of the paper.

"Their arch-rivals are the Electrics. Write that down."

Victor wrote Electrics next to Pros. "Strange names," he muttered, and chuckled again.

"Stranger than Blue Devils?" Johnny responded.

"Ya got me there!"

"Okay," Johnny continued. "Now, each team has five players: five Pros and five Electrics. Write that down."

Victor wrote the number five under each team. "No subs?"

Johnny held up a hand. "We'll get to that in a minute. Boron Field House is part of a big basketball group called the E-Association."

"Why E?" asked Victor.

"It stands for Elemental," Johnny answered, "'cause it's got a whole bunch of basic basketball stadiums in it that make up the association." He pointed to the paper, and Victor wrote while Johnny went on. "Now, there are two leagues in the E-Association: the N-League and the I-League."

Victor chortled as he wrote. "So, we got the E-Association, the N-League, and the I-League. They should call it alphabet basketball. What do *N* and *I* stand for?"

"*N* stands for neutral, and *I* stands for ion, 'cause they like to keep their *eye on* the game."

Victor nodded. "I like that." He wrote it down.

"Boron Field House is part of the N-League," Johnny continued. "Now, every stadium in the E-Association has a rank. It's based on stuff like the number of seats and how many people it can hold and a bunch of other stuff. They call

it the A-Weight, and the *A* stands for all."

"Makes sense."

Johnny nodded. "Good. Now, in the E-Association, the subs are called New Ones, and each stadium is only allowed a certain amount of them."

"How many?" asked Victor.

"Well, to get the number of New Ones, you take the A-Weight and subtract the number of players allowed on each team. The A-Weight of Boron Field House is eleven. So how many players are allowed on each team?"

Victor looked at the paper. "Uh, five."

"And eleven minus five equals . . . ?"

"Six. So, each team gets six New Ones."

"No, no," Johnny corrected. "That's six New Ones for the whole field house—both sides."

Victor nodded and wrote it down. "Y'know, this is entertaining, but maybe we should get to chemistry."

Johnny grinned. "What makes you think we haven't been?"

Victor's eyes glazed over. "What are you talking about?"

Johnny picked up the diagram. "You said this was like a play Coach Ira drew, right?"

"Yeah."

"But it's not. This is a drawing of an *atom*."

Victor leaned forward and plopped his head into his hands. "You lost me."

Johnny pointed at the diagram. "What are the names of the teams?"

"The Pros and the Electrics."

"Yes! *Protons* and *electrons*! And how many are on each team?"

"Five."

"And what is the A-Weight—or *atomic* weight—of the field house?"

"Eleven."

"And how do you find out the number of New Ones—or *neutrons*—in it?"

"By subtracting the A-Weight from the number of players

on each team: eleven minus five equals six."

"And what is the name of the field house?"

"Boron."

Johnny set the diagram on the table in front on him. "Congratulations! You just described the boron atom!"

Victor stared at the drawing, then at Johnny, mouth agape. "Really? You mean, I got it? But . . . how?"

"We put things in a way you understand!"

Victor stared again at the paper, and then flashed his teeth. "This is jake! Let's do another one!"

They spent the rest of the session converting atoms into basketball teams, and when Johnny quizzed him at the end of their time together, Victor got every answer correct. It was their most productive session ever.

But the real test came at their next session. Johnny quizzed Victor again; and again, Victor got every answer correct! Same with Wednesday's session. He remembered it all! It was working!

Thursday was Victor's test day. Somehow the entire town of Provenance knew about it, and they were all on pins and needles. Johnny was so anxious he could barely concentrate on his studies.

The only person who wasn't nervous was Wilson. He spent the day razzing Johnny whenever he saw him (when Lazlo wasn't around, of course). "You're goin' down, Whittaker. You and Victor. Stick a fork in you, 'cause you're done!"

Then, late that afternoon in English class, the school principal himself delivered a note to Johnny. Mrs. Wagner stopped teaching, and all eyes, including Wilson's and Lazlo's, settled on him. "Read it, Mr. Whittaker," the principal said calmly.

Johnny unfolded the note. "It's from Victor. He says, 'I passed! With a B-!'"

The class broke out in cheers. Lazlo actually smiled at him. What Johnny didn't read aloud was, "*We did it! And it's all because of you! Thank you! Victor.*" The principal slipped out of the room, and moments later, cheering was heard from other classes throughout the building. Everyone rejoiced—

everyone, Johnny noticed, except Wilson. He just looked very pale.

On Friday morning, before school, Victor came to the Whittaker house and dropped off tickets to tomorrow's game. There were enough for the whole family and one extra in case Johnny wanted to invite a guest. His first thought was Emmy, but that lasted only a second before her image was replaced by Lisa. At lunch that afternoon he asked her, and she immediately squealed and said yes! She hugged him, and he wasn't at all certain that he didn't start floating on a sea of hearts.

Saturday, they all went to the game, even Fiona. "I may not be able to see, but I can hear just fine, and I can certainly feel the energy of the crowd!" she said. Johnny was glad they were all together and euphoric that Lisa sat beside him, but he fully expected to be bored silly by the game.

He couldn't have been more wrong.

The contest wasn't fifteen seconds old before Victor pulled off an incredible steal and executed a behind-the-back pass—to *himself*—completely catching three opposing players off guard. Then he made a spectacular layup for Duke's first two points. The crowd went wild, and that was only the beginning. Victor really was a phenomenon—a scoring machine!

The game ratcheted up in tension and excitement, and Johnny finally understood what all the fuss was about, especially in the fourth quarter. Victor was taking a rest on the bench, and before anyone could blink, the score was tied! Victor instantly reentered the game and went on a scoring rampage. When the final buzzer sounded, Duke had won the game!

But the best part came right *after* the buzzer. Lisa jumped into Johnny's arms, then squealed and kissed him! Right on the lips!

Charlie started giggling, while Harold's eyebrows darted up. Then Harold whispered something to Fiona, who reached

out and tapped Johnny sharply on the shoulder. The kiss was already firmly etched onto his lips and into his memory. Lisa stepped back, blushing with excitement. But Johnny didn't notice the giggles, the taps, or the blush. He couldn't even hear the growing cheers of the crowd.

He was transported . . . on cloud nine . . . over-the-moon happy.

Chapter Thirteen

Johnny could not recall ever being this happy. Perhaps when he became a Christian and was baptized, but that was more peaceful and contented than happy. And he liked happy!

The next week, when he wasn't working on the project with Ben or tutoring Victor—who was starting to catch on to the lessons now—Johnny was floating on a billowy cloud with Lisa. The Saint Valentine's Day dance, formerly a silly contrivance, became an opportunity of wonderous glee. Johnny asked Lisa to go with him. She immediately accepted with a hug, and again the world became moonbeams and stars. Life had made a hard turn at discouragement and pulled into the driveway of bliss. Lazlo even seemed a little friendly since the game. And gratefully, Wilson left Johnny alone.

The only negative was Emmy. She was still distant. In the back of his mind, Johnny wrote it off as jealousy. He wanted to patch up things between them, of course. It was his Christian duty. But even more than that, he missed her friendship.

On the following Monday, Johnny caught up with Emmy on her way home, hoping to smooth things over with her. But right off the bat, he said the wrong thing. "I want you to know

that just because Lisa and I are, y'know, *close*, that doesn't mean you and I can't still be friends."

Emmy bristled, almost visibly. "Wow," she said curtly. "You really do think a lot of yourself, don't you?"

"No! I just—"

"As if I don't have anything better to do than wait around until the great John Whittaker can spare a free moment from his little girlfriend to spend time with me!"

"Emmy!"

"Y'know, I really expected you'd want a girl with brains instead of a flirt with dust blowing between her ears."

Now it was Johnny's turn to bristle. "At least I'm not all goo-goo-eyed over somebody three times my age!"

She stopped abruptly. "What are you talking about?"

Johnny faced her squarely, and the floodgates opened. "You think I haven't seen that picture of Al Hammett you're carrying around? And those letters? I can't believe he's writing to you! He's old enough to be your father, Emmy! He should be ashamed of himself! You may not like Lisa, but at least she and I are a *real* couple and not a fantasy like you and Al!"

Emmy blinked back tears; her face contorted with rage. "You always think you're so smart, but you have no idea what you're talking about!"

"Yeah? You didn't think that when I helped you get a good grade on your science project! You were gonna buy one from Wilson, of all people!" Johnny reminded her angrily.

"*You* couldn't even figure out where your first classroom was!" she spat back at him. "If it hadn't been for me, you'd still be wandering around the halls looking for room 101B!"

"Well, if I'm such a dope, why do you wanna hang around with me?"

"I don't!" she bellowed. "Not anymore!" Emmy huffed away up Magnolia Lane and bolted toward her house.

Johnny hollered after her, "Wait! You don't wanna be friends anymore?"

"No!" she cried. She bounded up her front porch steps, stormed through her front door, and slammed it behind her.

Johnny couldn't believe his ears. He and Emmy weren't friends anymore. He felt . . . hollow inside. Johnny walked slowly toward his house. "That was *not* what I wanted to happen at *all*," he muttered.

The next day, Tuesday, Emmy wasn't in school. In fact, she didn't come to school for the rest of the week. Johnny felt sick about it all, but he found comfort in the company of Lisa. They ate lunch together every day. Johnny did notice that she seemed about as deep as a layer of skin. But what skin! It was perfect!

His happiness made him almost oblivious to everything else going on around him. Ben teased him about not being able to concentrate on the project, though it was moving along at a great pace. And even when Ben asked about Wilson's behaving strangely of late, Johnny admitted he hadn't noticed. He was in love!

Then, Friday came.

Johnny and Lisa had their usual lunch together, and Lisa, like all the other girls in school, chattered excitedly about the dance the next day. Her conversation centered mostly on her dress, her hair, and how she was so looking forward to a perfect afternoon. Johnny smiled at her enthusiasm, and then thought of something and chuckled.

"What?" she asked. She blushed. "I know. I'm being silly about this, aren't I?"

"No, no! Not at all!" Johnny said.

"Then why did you laugh?"

"Oh, I was just thinking how a couple of weeks ago, I wouldn't have thought it possible that I'd actually be going to this dance," Johnny replied.

"Why not?"

He shrugged. "I thought the whole holiday was strange, to be honest. If everyone knew the *true* history of Saint Valentine, they wouldn't be associating it with love."

"They wouldn't? How come?"

"Well, let's just say his story is pretty bloody."

Lisa's eyes grew wide. "It is?" She smiled. "Tell it to me!"

Johnny was taken aback. "Really? Are you sure?"

"Yes! I want to know!"

Johnny shook his head. "Okay!" He launched into the history of Saint Valentine and how, rather than roses, chocolates, and pretty cards, it was composed of treason and prison, leading to his execution by beheading. Then Johnny threw in the Saint Valentine's Day massacre of mobsters in Chicago for good measure.

He thought Lisa would cringe at some point in the story, but she sat in rapt attention, enthralled at every detail—the more violent and bloody, the better. When he finished, she smiled broadly. "That was great! I love a good story!"

He lost himself in her smile. "Me too," he said.

She batted her eyelashes, and he melted like an ice cube on a hot griddle.

"You're so smart!" she gushed. "How do you know so much?"

"I read," he answered simply. "Saint Valentine is one of the early church fathers. As a Christian, I think it's important to know all we can about church history."

She sat back in her chair. "Oh, so *that's* why I didn't know anything about him!"

"What do you mean?"

"Well, I'm not a Christian," she said with an innocent smile.

Johnny's smile faded, and his heart started sinking into his stomach. This news was so unexpected, all he could think to say was, "Why not?"

She shrugged and reached for her milk carton. "I just wasn't raised that way." She took a drink.

Johnny's mouth opened, but no words came out. Lisa noticed, set down the carton, and leaned in, concerned. "But it's okay if *you* are!"

Johnny finally found his voice. "But don't you believe in God?" The irony of the question wasn't lost on him; it wasn't all that long ago that he himself wasn't sure how he felt about the existence of God. But he now realized how silly he had been to disbelieve.

Lisa shrugged again. "I never really thought about it, but

if I had to answer, I'd probably say no. I mean, look at the story you just told. Saint Valentine believed in God, and he got his head chopped off. No, thanks."

Johnny's heart thudded against the bottom of his stomach like a lead bar. But before he could say anything else to Lisa, the bell rang, ending lunch period.

Lisa hopped up, grabbed her bag and her tray, gave his arm a squeeze with her free hand, and said, "See you in gym class!" She skipped to a trash can, dumped her lunch refuse in it, put the dirty tray on the cart, turned and gave him a little wave, and disappeared out the door.

Johnny reverted to walking around in a daze, but this was a different sort of daze. He managed to get through gym class without any incidents, and as the girls ended up doing a craft that day, he didn't see Lisa. English was a blur, and Lisa's folks picked her up after school to shop for a dress for the dance.

Johnny made his way down to Ben's workshop, and Ben immediately knew something was wrong. "What happened, boy?" he asked. "You look like ya just swallowed up a spoonful of castor oil."

Johnny gulped and recounted his lunch conversation with Lisa.

Ben chewed on his lip as he listened. "You know what Scripture says about not pairin' up with unbelievers, dontcha?"

Johnny nodded. "But I thought that just meant don't marry them."

"Might be. Might also be that we're not to git into any relationships that might maybe pull us away from our convictions. The question you gotta answer is: Is that really somethin' you wanna take a chance on?"

Johnny's heart sank down to his knees. "No," he said. "It's not."

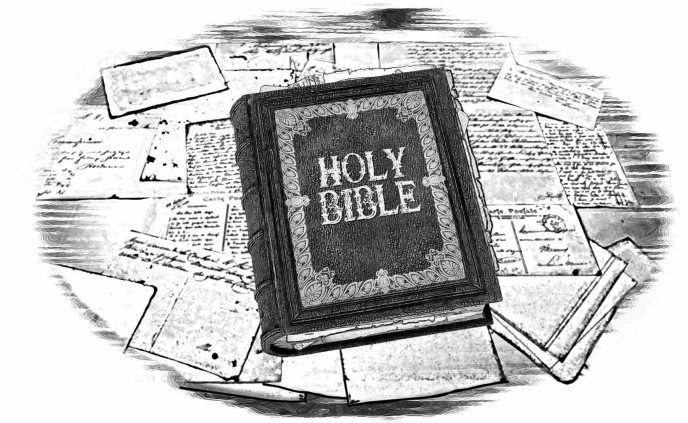
Ben put a hand on his shoulder. "I'm sorry, boy. Life has a way of changin' course mid-stream."

"Yeah. Everything was going so well. For a few days."

"So, whatchu gonna do?" Ben asked.

Johnny absentmindedly fiddled with the tools on Ben's workbench, then answered, "What I have to do."

Chapter Fourteen



After barely touching his supper and a fitful night's sleep, Johnny found himself knocking on Lisa's front door early Saturday morning. She answered it, and he thought she looked adorable even though she hadn't—as she put it—"made myself presentable yet."

She came outside, and they sat beside each other on her porch swing. "It's chilly," she said, her lashes fluttering. She inched closer to him.

Johnny felt every ounce of resolve drain out of his body. Somehow, he managed to rally himself, and before her lashes flapped one more time, he blurted it out: "Lisa, I know this is not something you want to hear, but I can't take you to the dance."

At first she said nothing, as though she hadn't heard or understood what he had said. Then her lovely eyes narrowed, and she smiled her beautiful smile. She pushed him playfully. "You're such a teaser!"

He shook his head slightly, apologetic. "I'm not teasing."

Her smile faded and was replaced by a look of concern. "But why? Is everything all right?"

"No," he replied as evenly as he could. "Everything's not

all right."

"What is it? Tell me and we'll fix it!"

"There's only one way to fix it, and I think it may be more than you're willing to do."

"What, John? Whatever it is, I'll do it!"

He prayed for courage. "Believe in God. Become a Christian."

She blinked several times, searching his face, hoping, he knew, to see some sign that this was all just one big put-on. "You're serious?" she said.

He nodded. "Very."

"I—I don't understand." Her eyes filled with tears, and it tore at his heart.

"I know," he replied, "and that's the problem." He took a deep breath. "I like being with you, Lisa. A lot. You're a really wonderful person. You make me happy."

"You make me happy too!"

"Thanks, but it's not enough. I'm a Christian, Lisa. My faith is important to me. In fact, it's the most important thing in my life. More important than my parents or my friends. More important than my happiness."

"More important than me," she whispered.

He felt a lump in his throat. "Yes," Johnny said.

"So, this isn't just about the dance." Lisa's voice quavered. "This is about us." Johnny looked down, and she went on. "You're breaking up with me?"

He lowered his head, and his shoulders slumped. "Yes."

Lisa closed her eyes, and the tears came.

Johnny peeked up at her. *Even crying, she looks pretty*, he thought. He wanted to hug her and tell her he was only kidding. But he wasn't kidding. "Lisa, I'm—"

She held up a hand and backed away from him. "Don't you dare say you're sorry! If this is your God and your Christianity, you can have them!" She stood, turned, and ran back into her house.

Johnny felt as if his insides had been pulled out and stomped on. Life had, once again, changed its course.

The river drifted by as it always did, seemingly unstoppable. The afternoon sun sparkled on its jagged surface, and Johnny thanked God for its beauty. He walked along the bank toward the grotto, his "hideout" at the river, though not really, since most of his friends knew where it was. In fact, he was going there to try and rekindle a friendship he had broken.

As he crested a small rise, he saw Emmy sitting on a rock, gazing out at the flowing water. He descended the crest, moved quietly to where she sat, and sank down beside her.

Neither of them made a sound for several moments. Then Emmy said, "Pretty."

Johnny nodded. "It is."

"I meant Lisa's dress for the dance. I'll bet it's pretty." Johnny said nothing, and she glanced over at him. "Speaking of which, shouldn't you two be there right about now?"

He slowly shook his head. "No. No, we shouldn't."

Now Emmy faced him. "Why? What'd you do now?"

Johnny shrugged. "The right thing for the right reason," he said wistfully. "Though it was very painful."

He shared with her the events of yesterday afternoon and this morning. Emmy was stunned. "You actually broke it off with her?"

"I had no choice," he explained. "I'm a Christian now, and I have to abide by Christian principles. Even if it means giving Lisa up."

Emmy shook her head. "Well, I have to say, I'm impressed with how you stuck by your convictions. Poor Lisa, though!"

Johnny nodded and muttered, "Poor Lisa."

They were quiet for a few more moments, looking at the river. Then Johnny said, "Emmy, I'm really sorry for the things I said, and for belittling you and Al. It was mean and cruel."

He heard a small, muffled sob. Johnny turned to Emmy and saw that she was trying to choke back tears. She sniffed and said, "Naïve, too." He looked puzzled, and she opened her bookbag, pulled out the picture, and handed it to him.

As he examined it more closely, he realized that, though it resembled Al, it wasn't. "Who is this?" he asked.

"Al," Emmy answered. "Just not the Dashiell Hammett 'Al' you thought it was." She took the picture back and held it gently. "This is my father's older brother, Alfonso Capella." She smiled sadly. "My favorite uncle."

"Wow!" Johnny exclaimed. "He really does look like Al—our Al, I mean—the detective."

Emmy nodded. "Yeah, that's why I liked Al so much. He reminded me of my uncle. I really loved my uncle, though he behaved strangely sometimes. He would dote on me, give me gifts, and treat me like I was a princess. But then he'd go off by himself and be very sad. And sometimes when he spent the night with us, I'd hear him yelling in his sleep, sometimes screaming in Italian, having horrible nightmares. And the next morning he'd look terrible, almost like he'd been beaten up. He'd always ask me for a hug and tell me that it was the only thing that could help him pull himself together. And it always did, and we'd go out and have a great time, and he would be sweet and loving."

She paused, and Johnny asked, "So, why all the yelling and screaming and nightmares?"

Emmy's face was etched with sadness. "Uncle Alfonso fought in World War I, in the Italian Army. He was part of the Isonzo Campaign."

Johnny's eyes widened. "Wow."

"Then you know about it—what am I saying? Look who I'm talking to, of course you do. Tell me what you know."

"Well, it wasn't just one or two battles, but *twelve* separate battles on the same mountain range along the Austrian/Italian border, each one worse than the previous one. Some of the most savage fighting of the war happened in those battles, and the campaign lasted almost two and a half years."

Emmy nodded. "That about sums it up. Except to say that Uncle Alfonso fought in every single one of those battles and somehow survived. He saw terrible action and slaughter—his friends being killed around him. You remember in history class when we learned what General Sherman said about the

Civil War: ‘War is all . . .’” She couldn’t finish it.

“‘Hell,’” Johnny finished for her.

She nodded. “Well, Uncle Alfonso went through that.” Tears began trickling down her face. “And he tried to deal with it, and he *did* deal with it. Until one day a few years ago, he couldn’t deal with it anymore. And he stopped dealing with it and with everything else.” The tears streamed down her face now. “And that day was Saint Valentine’s Day.”

She broke down weeping at the memory of her uncle’s death. Johnny cried with her, holding her in his arms. Her sobs echoed throughout the woods near the grotto. All other sounds faded away in the still air.

And the gentle river rolled on.

Chapter Fifteen

What a difference a week makes.

If only I could go back to the beginning of last week, Johnny thought. Ignorance truly was bliss. Everything was so happy then. Now when he saw Lisa, she alternated between crushed tears and burning anger, and several of her female friends followed suit toward Johnny with the burning anger part.

His tutoring sessions with Victor were also getting more difficult, which was only natural since Victor was now progressing in the chemistry course. Translating everything into basketball lingo was still working so far, but Johnny knew it was only a matter of time before that system crashed and would need to be replaced by a new one. Johnny had no idea what that new system would be, but if he didn't come up with something soon, it could be a big problem for Victor as the Tobacco Road Tournament drew closer.

Victor knew this too, which meant Lazlo also knew it, which meant the whole school knew it as well. Lazlo's threatening looks had returned.

What's more, Wilson was behaving stranger than ever. When he heard about Victor's potential future problems, he was happy. But that was temporary. He rapidly returned to

what seemed to be his normal state of late: haunted. His eyes darted about as if he were watching a tennis match, and he fidgeted like crazy—he couldn't seem to keep still. Johnny saw him whispering with different groups of kids in dark corners of the school hallways.

On the way home one afternoon, Johnny followed Wilson. He visited several shops on Main Street in town, talking in secret with customers inside. After each visit, Wilson wrote something in a small notebook.

As he came out of one store, Wilson dropped a piece of paper, but he didn't seem to notice it. Once Wilson walked away, Johnny sprinted over and picked the paper up. It was filled with letters and numbers in what looked like a code, but Johnny couldn't make heads or tails out of it.

Suddenly Wilson was back and grabbed the paper out of Johnny's hands. "Mind your own business, Whittaker!" he barked, storming off.

Johnny watched him go and shook his head. "Very odd," he muttered.

Of course, the week wasn't all bad. On the upside, he and Emmy were friends again. The two of them worked with Ben every afternoon before Johnny's tutoring sessions with Victor to complete the pieces needed for the imagination enhancer project for Steve. In light of what had happened with Lisa, Johnny felt an even greater weight to use this project—and all his talents and abilities—to share his faith and spread the gospel with those around him. "I may have blown it with Lisa," he explained to Emmy as they walked home one afternoon, "but I don't want to blow it with Steve."

"Do you know what Steve and Paul and the Mangle family believe?" she asked.

"No," Johnny replied. "But I want this invention to help them along the path to faith—or to deeper faith."

By Thursday, all the components were ready. They decided to set it up in the shed behind Johnny's house. Johnny, Emmy, and Ben cleaned the shed out and then put everything in place. Johnny had finally come up with the right name for the project, and Emmy painted a sign with the

new name to go over the door. On Friday night, Johnny called Steve to see if he might feel well enough to come over the following day.

"Is there something worth coming to see?" Steve asked.

"There's only one way to find out," Johnny replied. "Y'know, if you're *brave* enough . . ."

"Oh-ho-ho, so that's how this is gonna go, huh? Okay, smart guy! You're on!"

"Great! Emmy and I will pick you up after lunch! Be ready!"

Steve blew a razzberry into the phone and hung up.

Saturdays during the school year seemed to have the worst weather to get outside and do things. Not so this Saturday. Johnny woke to a sunny and unseasonably warm February day. The barometer he had built confirmed his senses. This would be a perfect day to unveil their newest invention, and he prayed that it would encourage Steve to ponder more deeply the unexplainable peace and joy of a relationship with God.

The morning was occupied with last-minute tweaks and a few extra embellishments. After lunch Johnny and Emmy went to collect Steve, who appeared to be even weaker and in greater pain than the last time Johnny saw him.

"We don't have to do this if you're not up to it," Emmy said, concerned.

Steve waved her off. "This isn't my first rodeo, you know."

"Are you sure you're up to it?" Paul asked.

"I wanna see what these weirdos have been up to!" Steve replied. "Let's go!"

Twenty minutes later, Johnny pushed Steve's wheelchair into the Whittaker backyard and up to the shed, with Paul glued to Steve's side. A blanket covered Emmy's sign.

Steve's lip curled up in a sneer, and he glared at Johnny, unimpressed. "It's a shed. Big hairy deal. I have one just like it at my home."

Johnny grinned. "Not like this one. I guarantee it." He moved up to the shed door, then turned back to face Steve and Paul. "Have you guys ever read any Bible stories?"

Paul said, as he only could, “No, our barents don’t pave a hible.”

Emmy beamed. “Well, it’s time you did then!”

Confused, Steve asked, “You’re holding a church service in your shed?”

Johnny shook his head. “Not a church service.” He motioned to Emmy. “M’lady, if you please!”

She moved into position and grabbed an end of the blanket. “Gentlemen!” she proclaimed, and Johnny drummed his hands on the shed’s doorpost dramatically. Emmy went on. “Welcome one and all to . . .”

Johnny’s drumming reached a crescendo and stopped, and at that moment Emmy pulled down the blanket with a flourish, revealing the sign. “*The Phantasmic Confabulator!*” they both trumpeted. Johnny threw open the shed door theatrically, and Ben appeared in the doorway.

“Howdy, gents!” Ben said.

Steve and Paul exchanged looks. Then Paul frowned and said, “You milt a ban—uh, built a man?”

Ben chuckled.

“No!” Johnny said. “We built what’s inside!”

Steve cocked his head. “Spiffy name. But it’s still just a shed.”

“Have a little imagination,” Johnny chided. He moved to the back of Steve’s wheelchair and pushed him through the doorway. “In fact, that’s what the Confabulator is designed to help you do!”

“Then why don’t you call it the Imagination Confabulator?” Paul asked, piling in behind them.

Johnny mused. “Not a bad idea. Though, like Steve said, ‘Phantasmic’ *is* spiffy.”

Steve looked about. The shed had been emptied of all its contents, and large white sheets covered the walls. “My dad’s shed is stuffed with gardening things—tools and boxes and junk,” he said. “This looks more like a tent.”

“It’s actually a sensory experience,” Johnny said, closing the door. He pushed Steve’s chair into the middle of the room, between two stools, and handed him a cord with a button

affixed to its end. Emmy quickly sat on the stool to Steve's left, and Johnny pointed for Paul to take the stool to Steve's right. Ben stood in the back behind what appeared to be a cabinet, on top of which was a large box with all manner of switches and buttons and wires coming out of the back.

Johnny walked to the corner opposite Ben and picked up a smaller version of Ben's control panel box. Then he announced grandly, "Good people, let me take you back, back, *back* to a far-off land in a far-off time! I give you . . . ancient Israel!"

With a flip of a switch, the house lights turned off. At the same time, the sheets lit up with vibrant colored images of the Israeli countryside. The images changed to new ones at different times.

Paul's eyes bulged as wide as an owl's at midnight. "Whoa! This really *is* spiffy! It's like a movie theater!"

"Except a movie theater only has one screen. This one has screens all around you!" Emmy said.

Steve, too, seemed impressed. "It's . . . it's like really being there."

Johnny felt a wave of satisfaction flow over him. This was playing out even better than he expected.

Paul scanned the room, looking for clues to how Johnny displayed the pictures on the sheets. What he couldn't see were four still projectors, cleverly concealed, pointing to the four different walls. Johnny controlled them by the switches on his panel. Paul also couldn't see the speakers placed throughout the room, two on each wall behind the sheets. He did see a microphone suspended from the ceiling, hanging a foot above Steve's head.

Johnny handed each of them a script. Ben then flipped a switch on his box to turn on small spotlights so they could read them.

"Maybe I'm thick," Steve said, "but what in the world is all this?"

"Like I said, it's a sensory experience," Johnny replied. "But it's also interactive, so you're involved as some of the characters in the story."

“I told you before, I don’t want to act out a play,” Steve said. “I’d rather watch.”

“I went to a lot of work. At least give it a try,” Johnny pleaded.

Steve scowled. “Fine. But why a Bible story? I mean, if I’m gonna be a character, I’d like to be a musketeer like D’Artagnan, or maybe even Huck Finn. Something exciting!”

“The Bible *is* exciting!” Ben said. “All this here is gon’ show you how excitin’ it really is!”

Paul read the cover page of the script. “‘David and Goliath’? These are Bible characters?”

Emmy’s brow furrowed. “Of course! You don’t know the story of David and Goliath? How David went out and—”

“Now hol’ on!” Ben interrupted. “Don’t be tellin’ ’em the end before they experience the journey!”

“Right!” Johnny agreed. “Steve, you’ll play David. He’s the main character. He’s an Israelite teenager. Maybe fifteen years old.”

“Is he good-looking? ’Cause I want to be someone who’s good-looking.”

Emmy answered, “He was! The Bible says he was ruddy and handsome.”

“That’s me all over!” Steve crowed. “I’ll do it!”

Johnny said, “Paul, you’ll play Goliath. He’s a Philistine, an enemy of Israel. And he’s *huge*. Six cubits and a span.”

Paul’s eyes bugged out again. “Wow!” Then his face wrinkled up. “What are spubits and cans?”

Johnny shrugged. “It’s how they measured stuff back then. Just trust me when I say he was *big*! Really big! My pastor says Goliath was probably close to ten feet tall! A lot taller than David.”

“But nowhere near as ruddy,” Steve added. “In fact, he was probably ugly as a mud fence. So, good casting, Johnny.”

“Har har,” Paul retorted.

“I’m playing the last part,” Emmy chimed in. “Saul, Israel’s king.”

“But kings are boys,” Paul said.

“Sure,” Johnny answered. “Kings are boys. But I’m gonna

be running stuff with Ben, so I can't do the part."

Emmy made a sour face at Johnny. "I can handle it just fine myself, thank you."

"Okay! Open your scripts and get ready!" Johnny said.

They all turned to the first page as Johnny walked back to the corner where his gadgets and levers were displayed. He called out, "Steve, you start us off! Whenever you're ready, push that button!"

Steve managed to hold up the cord given to him. "You mean this red one?"

"It's the only button you've got," Paul teased.

"Brothers are such pills," Steve said. "All right, here goes."

He pushed it, and when he did, Johnny played a record of ancient Jewish music that his father had located in the Duke University library. The sound of a lyre set the stage.

"My friends," Johnny announced. "It's time for *adventure*!"

Everyone read their scripts, tentatively at first, but soon warming to the story, even with Paul's occasional and sometimes hilarious mess-ups. (At one point, as Goliath, he bellowed, "Why do you bine up for lattle? Am I not Phil Stine?" to which Emmy quickly hissed, "Not 'Phil Stine'—a *Philistine*!")

As they read, images of ancient Israel—Samuel the Prophet; the shepherd boy David; David's father, Jesse, and his jealous brothers; the armies of Israel and the Philistines; King Saul; and the giant Goliath—appeared and faded into each other on the walls around them.

But the images were only the beginning. At the appropriate places, thanks to the gears and pullies rigged up by Johnny and Ben, the sensory aspects of the adventure kicked into action. There weren't just audio sound effects, but also wind (via oscillating fans), water spray, smells of food and plants, the taste and feel of dust and dirt, the whipping of the sling, the whirring of the stone, and the earth-shaking thud of Goliath falling to the ground.

Steve really got into David's big speech, albeit with his

weak voice: “You come against me with sword and spear and javelin, but I come against you in the name of the LORD Almighty, the God of the armies of Israel, whom you have defied! This day the LORD will deliver you into my hands, and I’ll strike you down and cut off your head!” He especially liked that last part.

They even supplied Steve with a sword and a bag of squishy fruit atop a mannequin to represent Goliath’s head, which Steve (with a lot of help from Paul and Emmy) managed to sever.

When it was all over and the images and music had faded and the houselights came back up, Steve and Paul both sat very still. Emmy got up and joined Johnny and Ben at the control panel, a big smile on her face.

Ben nudged Johnny, nodded toward the brothers, and mouthed, “Say somethin’!”

Johnny said, “Well? What did you think?”

Paul spoke first. “That . . . was . . . *INCREDIBLE*!” He jumped up from his stool and faced them. “I—you—that—this—*WOW*!”

Johnny, Emmy, and Ben all laughed. Then Johnny said, “How about you, Steve?”

After a moment of silence, Steve said, “Paul, turn me around.” Paul did, and Steve continued, his head lowered. “I think—and this is really hard for me to say—I was wrong about not wanting to be part of a play.” He looked up, and they saw his eyes were moist from tears. “It was great—really great! I actually felt like I was *in* the adventure and not just in this wheelchair watching it!”

Johnny’s heart leapt within him. It seemed as though God had redeemed all their efforts. At least, the seed was planted.

Steve seemed to come alive, looking stronger than he had lately. “What an amazing story! And really exciting!” He paused, and then asked, “It’s supposed to be true, right?”

Emmy sniffed back a budding tear. “Yes. It really happened.”

“Are all Bible stories like that? I mean, the giant and the yelling and the spear and the sword and the hacking and the

sling?"

Ben laughed. "Well, not all of 'em. But it is powerful stuff all the way through."

"I do have a question," Steve said.

"Shoot," Johnny answered.

"How come David picked up five small stones? He only needed the one. No—don't tell me! I wanna look it up on my own!" He turned to his brother. "Paul, you think Dad has some books on this? I don't think we have a Bible." Then his face pivoted back to Johnny. "Can we do this one again?"

Johnny had hoped Steve would engage in the story, but he never expected this! "Uh, well, yeah, but not today. It takes a while to set up everything, and besides, we have a lot more adventures like this planned for you in the future."

Steve smiled. "Fantastic!"

"Meanwhile," Johnny added, "if your dad doesn't have any books on this, my dad has some you can borrow. And I'm sure we have an extra Bible you can have too!"

Ben nudged him again. "Tell him 'bout the disc!"

Johnny snapped his fingers. "Oh, yeah! There's an added bonus: The Phantasmic Confabulator is set up not just so you can *experience* adventures, but also so the experience can be recorded onto a disc that you can have and play on your Victrola turntable at home whenever you want!"

"You're joking!" Paul exclaimed.

"Yup! See?" Ben opened the doors of the cabinet, and inside was the tape-recording machine and a vinyl record recorder. Ben rewound the tape recorder, then put a blank disc on the turntable and lowered the needle. He then flipped a few switches on the panel, and both the tape recorder and the vinyl recorder started up simultaneously. They heard Johnny's voice coming from a small speaker, saying, "My friends, it's time for *adventure*!" And the recording of their David and Goliath performance began playing out.

"It may not be the complete experience," Johnny said, "but it's a great reminder of it, and it helps you look forward to the next one!"

Steve thought it was the cat's meow and that the whole

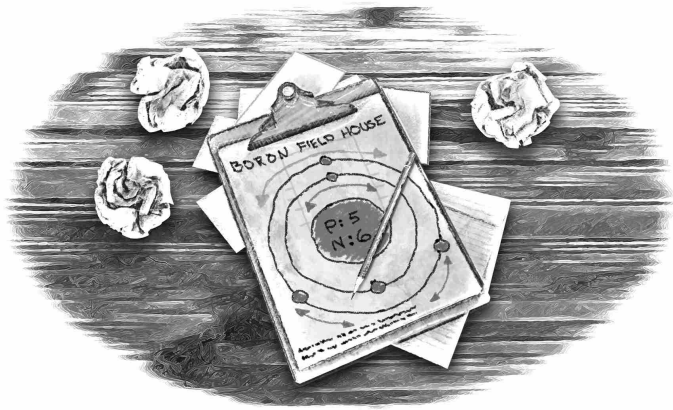
machine was amazing. Paul was equally impressed and even made some suggestions on how to improve it.

"Your suggestions are great, Paul!" Johnny said. "We can't do all of them right now—some are beyond existing technology. But maybe one day we'll be able to take the Phantasmic Confabulator and go boldly where no man has gone before!"

Emmy cleared her throat loudly. Johnny looked at her and then added, sheepishly, "Oh, uh, and woman, too, of course!"

They all laughed.

Chapter Sixteen



The next week, temperatures started rising—in more ways than one. Spring was on the way; each day was a little warmer than the previous one. The winter frosts were gone, and green buds began appearing on the trees.

Johnny prepped Victor for his next science test, which was barreling down the tracks like a runaway locomotive. It was the last test he'd need to pass before the basketball madness that was the Tobacco Road Tournament started two days later, on Friday, March 1. Victor seemed to be getting more and more comfortable with the material, and Johnny was pleased at his progress, mostly because he liked seeing Victor succeed, but also because it meant Lazlo acted much nicer to Johnny.

Curiously, though, Wilson didn't. He became even more snarky and cutting than normal, loudly criticizing Johnny in public as though he was trying to convince anyone listening that Victor was *not* going to pass the test *or* play in the tournament.

Things reached a boiling point in the cafeteria at lunch period on Thursday. Without warning, Wilson sauntered up to where Johnny sat and slapped his sandwich out of his hands

and onto the floor.

"Hey!" Johnny exclaimed. "What's your beef, Knox?"

"My beef is *you*, Whittaker!" Wilson hovered over him. "Thinkin' you can get Victor Farnsworth to pass that test! You know it ain't gonna happen! You're wastin' everyone's time!"

What is this guy's problem? Johnny thought. He said aloud, "Are you *nuts*? Why do you even care? Go annoy someone else for a change!"

Johnny reached down for his sandwich, and Wilson shoved him so hard that he almost fell out of his chair. Johnny popped up, pushed the chair aside, and went into a karate stance, when suddenly Lazlo appeared out of nowhere and whacked Wilson upside the head with a food tray, knocking Wilson off balance.

"OW!" Wilson hollered.

Lazlo pointed a beefy finger at him. "I told you to leave Whittaker alone, Knox!"

"Yeah? Make me, ya big ape!" Wilson balled up his fists, even though Lazlo stood a half-foot taller than him. Lazlo followed suit. Johnny tried to process the situation, uncertain whether the whole thing wasn't just a big ruse. Then Wilson charged forward with a roar! Johnny had to admire his courage, attacking someone Lazlo's size, but not for long.

TWEEEE!

Before Wilson and Lazlo could connect, Coach Conrad appeared, grabbed each of them by the arm, and pulled them apart roughly. "Knock it off, ladies!" he bellowed.

"That's what I'm trying to do," Wilson retorted, "knock his block off!"

"You and what army, ya little twerp!" scoffed Lazlo.

They went for each other again, and again the coach had to pull them apart. "Quiet! Both of ya!" he boomed. "You know there's no fighting allowed at this school! Ya both just earned yerselves a trip to the principal's office! Move it!"

He turned them toward the door when Wilson pointed at Johnny. "What about Whittaker? He started it!"

Johnny blinked. "Me? I was just eating my sandwich when __"

“Save it, Whittaker!” Coach Conrad snapped. “Save it for the judge. C’mon, join the party!”

Johnny huffed and then stormed out the door ahead of the coach, who dragged Wilson and Lazlo along with him.

In the principal’s office, Wilson again tried to set the blame on Johnny, but Lazlo defended him and said it was all Wilson’s doing. Coach Conrad then told what he saw. Johnny said nothing, preferring to remain silent as Jesus did when He was falsely accused.

Once they had all finished their stories, the principal, who had been chronicling the information, tossed his pencil on his desk and said, “Gentlemen, you know my policy: I will *not* tolerate fighting! Whittaker, you should know that better than anyone after what you did to Farnsworth last Christmas.”

Johnny bit his tongue, first to keep from professing his innocence in both instances, and second to stifle a smile at the memory of how he had kneecapped Lazlo with a karate kick during a rehearsal of the Christmas play when the big oaf hit him on the head with a shepherd’s cane. That stunt got Johnny expelled for the rest of the school year.

The principal continued, “I *should* suspend all three of you. But since no actual punches were thrown—except for the food tray—I’m only sending *you* home, Farnsworth, for the rest of the day. And you can thank your brother that it isn’t for longer than that. Now, git! All of you! And no more fighting, understood?”

They all nodded, and Wilson bolted out of the office. Johnny and Lazlo walked into the hallway just in time to see Wilson plow through the exit door to the outside. “Is Wilson acting odd?” Johnny asked Lazlo. “Odder than usual, I mean?”

Lazlo sneered and said thickly, “His face is gonna look odder than usual if he keeps badmouthing my brother.”

An impulse to cheer Lazlo on to pummel Wilson surprised Johnny. He felt shame and disappointment in himself and quickly dismissed the thought. “Sorry you got sent home, but thanks for defending me—again.”

Lazlo glowered down at him, grunted, and walked off.

Johnny made a mental note to keep an eye on Wilson.

Meanwhile, the week was also spent putting together a new Phantasmic Confabulator adventure for Steve, which they played out on Saturday. This time, Steve played Elijah the Prophet, confronting Ahab (performed by Paul) and the prophets of Baal. The Confabulator was filled with images, sounds, wind, dust, fire from heaven, pouring water, and lots of chanting.

As he did with David, Steve really got into the part where Elijah made fun of the prophets. “Pray louder! Baal’s a god, isn’t he? Maybe he’s daydreaming or going to the bathroom! Or maybe he’s gone off on a trip! Or he’s sleeping, and you’ve got to wake him up!”

(Steve, Paul, and Johnny all snickered at the ‘going to the bathroom’ part, and Emmy *tsked* her tongue and whispered to Ben, “Boys!” When she saw Ben was also snickering, she rolled her eyes and shook her head.)

The adventure was another resounding success, and as they wheeled Steve home, both he and Paul thanked Johnny again. They also asked a few questions about Elijah. And even one or two about God.

The following week was all about Victor: his test on Wednesday, his status on the Blue Devils squad, and the start of the Tobacco Road Tournament on Friday. Johnny tutored Victor at the Whittaker home on Monday and Tuesday after school, and Wilson taunted him about it the whole way home both days, though he didn’t try anything physical.

Johnny still didn’t understand why Wilson, of all people, would want Victor to fail and Duke to lose. Up until recently, Wilson had given every indication that he was a Duke University fan. He even wore one of their jerseys in gym class. Not to mention that he and Lazlo had been in cahoots since Lazlo came to Brookhaven last fall. But suddenly, Wilson had

turned anti-Victor and anti-Duke? It simply didn't add up. *Unless he's just anti-*me, Johnny thought.

On Wednesday, the day of the big test, Harold took Johnny to the university in the afternoon so Johnny could go over the material with Victor one last time before the exam. When Victor went to take the test, Johnny paced up and down the hallway outside the classroom, peering in the window of the door periodically to guess whether Victor was in trouble.

After what seemed an eternity, the students who completed the test began trickling out of the classroom. Curiously, many of them remained near the doorway as Johnny did, and it dawned on him that they also wanted to know how Victor had done.

Victor was the last student to emerge from the room. He looked at Johnny and his fellow classmates, shrugged, and said, "Well, I answered all the questions."

That was a good sign. Johnny nodded and smiled reassuringly.

Almost immediately after Victor exited the room, the door opened and the chemistry professor popped his head out and announced, "I know you're all anxious to see how Mr. Farnsworth did, and, to tell you the truth, I am as well. So, I'll be grading his test first. The results should come in no more than a few minutes." He popped back into the room and closed the door.

That "few minutes" wait became interminable. Johnny, Victor, and the other students all stood in silent vigil.

At last, just when it seemed they could stand it no longer, the door opened again, and the professor emerged. His face was a complete blank, betraying nothing. He handed Victor several folded sheets of paper, nodded to him solemnly, and returned to the room, again closing the door behind him.

Victor bit his lip. Johnny smiled at him again. Everyone in the hallway held their breath . . .

Victor unfolded the papers, and his shoulders fell. Johnny's heart sank, and the hallway denizens let out a collective sigh and muffled moan. Johnny started to reach out to him when Victor broke into a smile and held out the test.

On the front page was a big red C+—just the score he needed to be eligible to play!

Johnny laughed out loud. The hallway erupted in cheers and applause. Everyone pounded Victor on the back in congratulations, and Victor lifted Johnny onto his shoulder and marched him down the hallway. And just as they started off, Johnny heard a very faint, "Yaaa-hooo!" from inside the classroom.

They all paraded to the basketball arena and Coach Ira's office. The coach beamed and gave a little speech about how he always knew Victor could do it, he just needed the right instructor. Victor raised Johnny's arm as if he'd just won a bantamweight fight. Johnny pulled down his arm and raised Victor's instead. He was the one who actually passed the test.

Coach Ira joined the applause for both Johnny and Victor, then continued in a rousing pep talk about how the Blue Devils were going to take it all this year! A last volley of cheers and then the coach shooed away everyone so Victor could get ready for practice.

Victor clasped Johnny on the shoulder one last time and then stooped down and enveloped him in a quick but firm bear hug before disappearing into the locker room.

Coach Ira said, "I knew you could pull it off, son. Well done, lad! Well done!" He hoisted a big thumbs up, which Johnny returned, and then the coach followed Victor into the locker room.

Johnny made his way back to his father's office, basking in a feeling of immense satisfaction over a job well done. Harold wasn't there. Johnny expected that he was still teaching his class. He sat at his father's desk, a smile billboarding his soul. He would never have believed that helping someone play basketball of all things could be so fulfilling. But he did believe in the One who makes such unlikely things possible.

As he swayed back and forth in the swivel chair, Johnny's eye fell on a paper on the desk, partially concealed under the desk blotter pad. What caught his attention was the logo at the top of the page—"The University of Edinburgh" in

Scotland, where Harold had sent his grandfather's journal to be translated!

Johnny stopped mid-swivel and listened for any approaching footsteps in the hallway. Hearing none, he carefully slid the paper out from under the blotter pad and read it.

The euphoria he brought with him into the office instantly vanished.

The letter was written in what Johnny liked to call "professor-ese," the ambiguous, often convoluted language scholars liked to use to show how much more learned they are than everyone else. But there was one paragraph that was neither ambiguous nor convoluted:

> We have taken our translation as far as we can and are returning the journal and all its contents to you. We wish you all the best in your further translation of it, and in its application to your important research.

Johnny read the paragraph over several times just to make sure it said what he thought it said. The translators no longer had his journal. He looked at the date on the letter.

> Friday, December 20.

That was the Friday before the Christmas play. The translators had sent the entire journal back to Harold months ago!

Johnny's mind reeled. His father had lied to him—again! He quickly thought back to their conversation a few weeks ago after he had read Harold's history of the cloth. No, technically, it wasn't a lie. His father had only said that the journal was "still being studied." He didn't say where or by whom. It was still a misleading statement to make. Why would his father do such a thing? And what should Johnny do about it now?

His first thought was to confront his father, but Harold

would just turn it back on Johnny and accuse him of being childish again. No, he needed to do something more concrete.

He needed to find his property.

He scanned the room, looking for possible places where the journal might be hidden. Then Johnny realized his father would never keep it in a place as unsecure as his office. People were in and out of there all day, including Professor Mangle, and Johnny's presence proved it was rarely locked. Still, it couldn't hurt to have a look. He rose and took a step toward one of the bookshelves when he heard his father's voice from down the hall. Johnny quickly and carefully replaced the letter in its original position half under the desk pad blotter, repositioned the desk chair, and plopped into the chair in front of the desk seconds before his father entered.

Harold was all smiles. "I just heard! Congratulations, son—to you and to Victor!" He held out his hand, and Johnny took and shook it, rather stiffly, forcing a smile.

"Thanks, Dad." The words nearly cleaved to the roof of his mouth. He dropped his dad's hand.

Harold kept smiling, but his brow furrowed. He glanced around the room and then back at Johnny. "Is everything all right?"

Johnny nodded. "Just overwhelmed!"

Harold's brow relaxed, and he chuckled. "Understandable! Completely understandable! At least your part's over. What say we go out for a celebratory dinner?"

Johnny nodded again, but as Harold donned his coat, Johnny knew that certain things were *far* from over.

Chapter Seventeen

The next day, Johnny's mind was preoccupied with Harold and the journal. He needed to search his father's study at the house. Johnny had deduced it was the most likely spot for Harold to conceal the journal, as he had hidden things there before. Johnny just needed to figure out a good time to do it.

The moment presented itself that evening, after supper. Johnny cleared the table and set a stack of dishes in the sink, where Fiona stood. She felt for the faucet handle, turned on the hot water, felt for the dish on top, and began to scrub it.

Johnny felt a pang of guilt and a stab of panic. He still had not told her or Harold about Mrs. Huck visiting them and possibly coming to help Fiona. She'd be there at the end of the month, but Johnny knew Fiona was stubborn about needing help. It had to be mentioned at the right time in the right way, but he wasn't sure when or even what that was. Maybe he should just blurt it out right then and there. But before he could, Fiona turned her head to him and said, "So, lad, are ye looking forward to Saturday?"

His brow furrowed. "Saturday? The first championship game is tomorrow."

"Aye, but Charlie's birthday is Saturday! We're going to

the Falls. Don't tell me you forgot!"

He'd been so preoccupied, he *had* forgotten. "Oh, yeah, look, Fiona, I'm really—"

Fiona cut him off. "Are you actually gonna stand there, John Avery Whittaker, and try to tell me that you canna go to your little sister's birthday celebration?"

Johnny grimaced. "No, no, of course not."

"Good!" Fiona smiled. "'Cause I'd hate for ye to miss out on all the horseback ridin' we'll be doin'!"

Johnny perked up considerably. "Really? That's great! We haven't been since Christmas!"

"I thought ye'd enjoy it. Now, do me a favor and go make sure your father also has nae forgotten. I think he's in his study."

"Sure thing." He left her with the dishes and made his way down the hall to the Inner Sanctum. But Harold *wasn't* there. Johnny crossed to the large picture window above the credenza, having faintly heard giggling from outside. Once there, he peered out between the wooden blinds.

Harold was in the backyard, playing a silly game with Charlie where they both pretended to be airplanes. Johnny smiled at their good time and then wondered how it made Harold feel, only pretending to fly. He knew his dad had been a pilot during the Great War and, though he never said as much, that he missed flying a lot. A twinge of bitterness that he no longer had the kind of relationship with Harold that Charlie now did sparked in Johnny's spirit. He turned his back to the scene. That's when it hit him.

This was the perfect time to look for his journal! And standing before him was the perfect place to start:

The credenza.

He hesitated. He would once again be invading his father's privacy. And he didn't like it when his father did that to him. But the resentment Johnny felt at knowing Harold was keeping the journal—*his* property!—from him welled up and seemed to twist things around. If his dad could do that to him, then he should be free to look at his dad's personal papers, he reasoned.

From the kitchen, Fiona still clattered away with her pots and pans. He'd have to be quick. Fortunately, he had done this before—the night when Charlie had caught him.

It was now or never. Johnny ducked down, snatched the key from the little tray atop the credenza, unlocked it, and pulled open the drawer.

He instantly recognized the journal entry his father had removed from the Whittaker Family Bible. The pages were still lying right on top. Johnny perused them again and was reminded of the sickening feeling he had when he learned his father had abandoned him and his mother. But he couldn't be distracted by that now. He was in search of a more important item.

He rifled through the rest of the drawer and the other drawers as well, but the journal wasn't there. He put everything back into place, closed and locked the credenza, and replaced the key. Where to search next?

The desk. He whipped around and tried its drawers.

Locked.

And there was no key in a tray atop it. Johnny suspected the key to the desk was on a key ring planted firmly in Harold's pocket. For an instant, Johnny considered jimmying open the lock with the heavy letter opener on the desk, and he even started to reach for it. But it was as far as he got.

He heard the back door squeak open and closed, and then he heard Harold's and Charlie's voices join Fiona's in the kitchen. Johnny growled softly and tiptoed to the study door. He peered outside it, making certain no one was watching, walked confidently into the hallway, and headed back to the kitchen. "Hi!" he said, trying to sound nonchalant. "I was looking for you!"

"We were out back," said Harold, nodding toward Charlie, and then he took on a mock conspiratorial tone. "We snuck out the side door."

"We were flying!" Charlie exclaimed.

"We certainly were!" said Harold, picking her up and sailing her around the kitchen! "Vrrrrrooooooom!"

Charlie twittered wildly, and Fiona laughed. Johnny

managed a smile.

Harold brought Charlie in for a landing. “Your mother told me about a certain young lady’s birthday plans!” He tickled her, and she giggled. “They sound wonderful!”

“It should be fun,” Johnny agreed.

“I’ll have to come a little later. I have a project I’m working on with Professor Mangle. Meanwhile, you all can have fun with the horses.”

“Sounds like a plan,” Johnny said, and he instantly wished he had rehearsed the line. It was stilted, and everyone noticed.

Fiona chimed in before Harold could. “Everything all right, lad? Ye sound troubled.”

He perked up. “Yeah! Sorry, I just have a lot going on right now, including homework. I’d better get to it.” He made it to the stairway, then stopped. “Oh, Dad, I need to give you back the Whittaker Family Bible.”

Harold smiled and shrugged. “It’s okay, son. Keep it for a while longer if you like.”

Johnny smiled, but as soon as he turned away, his smile vanished. He plodded up the stairs, disgruntled at the memory of what was in his father’s journal, and even more disgruntled at not finding his own journal. When he got to his room, he secured his door, then went to his closet, removed the shoes from the corner, pried up the floorboards, and made sure the cloth was still securely hidden beneath them.

It was.

At least that much of my property is still under my control, he thought.

Friday was a blur. Johnny couldn’t seem to concentrate fully on anything, but between Ben and Emmy, they did manage to complete Steve’s next adventure. And that evening, they all went to the first game of the Tobacco Road Tournament—Duke versus Wake Forest. Victor was nothing short of brilliant, leading Duke to a solid win.

Johnny managed to forget the previous day’s frustrations

for the length of the game. But on the ride home, the situation scooted back to the forefront of his brain. Sleep was not his friend that night.

Johnny earnestly desired a relaxing time on Charlie's birthday that next day, and the morning accommodated, mainly because his father wasn't there. Harold dropped them off at the horse stables, then went back to finish up his project with Mangle and pick up the meat for the cookout later. Charlie rode tandem with Fiona, and though they couldn't gallop at all, Johnny could, and he dashed ahead and back along the river, McDuff racing alongside him, barking happily. They scouted out the trail, and he pretended he was Kit Carson, though he was pretty sure Kit Carson was never in North Carolina. When Johnny rode and felt the wind in his hair and the sun on his face, every single care melted away and was replaced by happiness.

At least for a little while.

At noon, they took the horses back to the stables and went to meet Harold at the picnic area near the Falls. Fiona had a banner made that read "Happy Birthday, Charlie!" and Johnny had strung it between two trees before their ride. He played fetch with McDuff for a while, then helped Fiona unpack the picnic supplies and side dishes—everything but the hotdogs Harold was supposed to bring with him.

Charlie and Johnny collected twigs and wood, and Johnny started a campfire so that the coals would be nice and hot for cooking. The fire had just gotten to a lovely blaze when Charlie yelled, "It's Daddy!"

But when Johnny looked up, he knew immediately that the peaceful day was about to explode.

Harold was crossing the field toward them, but he was still dressed in his work suit rather than in casual clothes. There were no hotdogs in sight. His father's face was grim, his jaw set, his eyes blazing hotter than the campfire. When he reached them, there was no loving or amicable greeting. He walked straight up to Fiona and belted out, "Why didn't you tell me about Johnny's fights?"

It was as though an icy wind came and blew out the fire.

Fiona's smile faded. "How did you know about that?"

"Karl Mangle told me. I had to hear it from a colleague, instead of hearing it from my wife."

"How did Mangle know about it?" Johnny asked in a flat tone.

Harold turned to look at him, his eyes as cold as a shark's. "*Professor* Mangle. He said he ran into one of your schoolmates, Wilson Knox, at the grocers. This Wilson said you'd started several fights with him since the beginning of the school year. So, I called your school principal. He confirmed at least one of the fights and said he had heard about the others. He also said you've been absent several times this year. He was surprised I didn't know anything about it."

Fiona took in a deep breath. "I—I'm sorry, Harold. But it wasn't really a fight—"

"He threatened someone! He had to be dragged away!"

Johnny jumped in. "That's not what happened—"

Harold cut him off. "Quiet! I knew about you kneecapping that Lazlo boy at the Christmas Carol rehearsal, but not about the rest of them!"

"He hit me on the head! I was defending myself!"

"Enough!" Harold snapped, his hand slicing through the air. "Not another word!"

Johnny stepped back. McDuff shied away, whimpering.

Fiona reached out, found Harold's arm, slid her fingers down it quickly, and grabbed his hand. "If the boy was defending himself, he had no choice, Harold. As for Wilson, Johnny told me what happened, and I believed him. He actually *prevented* a fight, and he wasn't dragged off. I didn't see any reason to—"

He pulled his hand from her grasp. "Didn't see any reason to involve me in my own son's life? I'm his *father*."

Charlie sat on the picnic blanket next to McDuff, wide-eyed, as still as a statue. Fiona looked near tears. "I'm sorry, husband, I truly am."

Harold spoke in a low, measured, forceful tone. "Never exclude me from what goes on in this family, Fiona. *Never.* I

won't stand for it."

"No, you'll run away, like you did last time." Though Johnny heard the words come out of his mouth, for a moment he thought someone else had said them.

"What did you say?" Harold fumed. He took a step forward. "What did you say to me?"

Johnny held his ground. "I said you'll run away from us, like you ran away from my mother and me. And you'll probably take my property with you and hide it, like you've done with my journal."

Harold's eyes unfocused, and Johnny could see he was putting it together. "You got into the credenza. You read the pages. You saw the letter on my desk at the university." He refocused on Johnny. "You invaded my privacy! You're nothing but a little sneak!"

Johnny clenched his teeth. "And you're a—"

"Johnny!" Fiona cried and stumbled between them. "Stop! Please, both of you stop! Don't do this!" She grasped for her husband's hands again. "Harold, I'm sorry! I'm *sorry*! I made a mistake, and it won't happen again! Please! It's Charlie's birthday!"

Johnny said nothing more. His eyes burned with sizzling, angry tears which he choked off. Charlie still didn't move, but tears flowed freely down her cheeks.

Harold stepped back, took several deep breaths, and spoke calmly. "The birthday is over. Put out that fire. Pack up everything. We're going home." He turned and walked toward the car, then stopped and turned back. "Immediately." He marched off.

Now Charlie cried aloud and ran to Fiona, who picked her up and comforted her. McDuff crept over to Johnny and licked his hand. Johnny, making a great effort to control himself, picked up a bucket they had brought for this purpose, went to the waterfalls, filled it, came back, and poured it over the fire. It hissed, popped, smoked, and died.

No one said anything on the way home. Even McDuff remained silent. When they went inside the house, they all dispersed to their separate places: Fiona and Charlie to the

kitchen, Harold to his study, and Johnny and McDuff upstairs to Johnny's room. The first thing he did there was to gather up the Whittaker Family Bible, take it to his parents' room, and put it on their bed.

He then went back to his room, closed the door, and reclined on his own bed. McDuff bounded up and plopped down beside him. He expected Harold, or Fiona, or both, to charge in at any moment and mete out punishment to him, but the house remained unusually still. He knew he needed to apologize to his father for disrespecting him and getting into his things, to Fiona for asking her to keep something from her husband, to Charlie for his part in ruining her birthday party, and to God for all of it. But right now, Johnny was so angry, all he could manage was a little of the last one, a whispered, "Help me, Lord."

Even in his anger, Johnny understood why Harold reacted the way he did. The very thing that happened with Grandpa Jackson and Janneth seemed to be happening again with Fiona: keeping information from him about his son. But the information had been kept from Johnny, too. Something strange had happened to him when he was a toddler, something involving blood. Was that why Harold was keeping the journal from him?

There was a knock on his door. McDuff looked up. Johnny rose and said, "Come in."

A small voice said, "I can't."

He moved to the door and opened it. Charlie stood there, a bowl of ice cream in one hand and a slice of cake with an unlit candle in the other. "Mommy said we should have this."

He glanced up and saw half of Fiona's head leaning out of the room down the hall. He looked back at Charlie. "She did?"

She nodded and looked pained. "Uh-huh. Could you take them? The ice cream is cold, and the cake is kinda heavy!"

He grinned, took them from her, and set them on his desk. She skipped in after him and bounced onto his bed, where McDuff licked her face. Johnny retrieved some matches from the desk drawer, lit the candle, and took both the cake and the ice cream over to her. "Make a wish and blow out the

candle!”

Charlie puffed out the tiny flame. She clapped. “Yay!” McDuff licked his chops.

“What’d you wish for?”

She shook her head. “No! I can’t tell you! If I do, it won’t come true!”

“Wanna know what I wished for?”

“You made a wish on my candle?”

“I did. It’s allowed. And since it’s not my birthday, even if I tell you, it could still come true. Wanna hear it?”

Charlie thought hard for a moment, trying to work through the logic, then finally said, “I guess it’ll be okay.”

He smiled. “I wished that your mommy knew that I’m sorry that I put her in a position of keeping things from Daddy.”

Charlie’s brow furrowed. “*That’s* your wish?”

“Yep.”

She frowned. “You shoulda wished for a pony.” Johnny laughed and Charlie giggled, but then she looked worried. “Daddy’s still really mad.”

“I know.”

“Is everybody gonna be okay?”

He fed her a bite of cake and ice cream. “I hope so.” He took a big bite as well. “Habby birfday, Challie,” he said, mouth full.

He fed her another bite. “Dank you, Johnny.” She stuck her finger in the ice cream, scooped out a blob of it, and gave it to a grateful McDuff, who licked it off greedily.

From down the hallway came a faint snuffle and a muffled, happy sob.

Chapter Eighteen

The next morning was the Lord's Day, and if everything wasn't exactly back to normal, they were all at least civil to each other. No apologies were proffered from either Harold or Johnny, despite the pastor's speaking on the topic of "forgiveness."

Whether it was due to Fiona's influence or Harold's own conscience, there didn't seem to be any punishment in the offing for Johnny's behavior. Rather, Harold spent the afternoon behind the closed door of the Inner Sanctum. Johnny's own conscience was weighing heavy on him, and though he really didn't feel up to it, he and Emmy went to the Mangle house and brought Paul and Steve back to the Phantasmic Confabulator for the next Bible adventure. This time it was one of Jesus' parables—a quite appropriate one, as it turned out: the parable of the prodigal son.

How do You do this, Lord? Johnny thought. They had completed setting up the adventure earlier that week, which was getting easier and easier to do. But Johnny had forgotten completely the story they had chosen. It was one he needed.

Steve was again affected by it, not because it was a grand action adventure, but because he played the prodigal. The

incredible forgiveness of the father—played by Ben this time—had everyone fighting tears.

Johnny, though, was most affected by the prodigal's confession, which Steve's performance nailed. "Father, I have sinned against heaven and before you. I am no longer worthy to be called your son." Steve's voice cracked when he said the last part, and Johnny blinked fast to maintain his composure.

It was a short adventure, and everyone seemed deep in thought about it as they walked Steve home. As Johnny returned to his house, he knew what he had to do.

But as soon as he stepped inside the door, Harold met him. "John, I need to see you in my office." He turned and led the way. Johnny followed silently.

In the study, Harold motioned for him to sit. Johnny complied. But rather than sit behind the desk as usual, Harold sat in the chair next to Johnny. Neither spoke for several long moments. Johnny was just about to say he was sorry when Harold spoke. "John, I want to apologize for my outburst yesterday, and for not hearing your side of things."

Johnny was so stunned, his mouth gaped. Harold apparently interpreted it as Johnny preparing to speak and said, "No, please, let me finish. I realize that neither of us has been exactly trustful of the other for the past several months. And while there may have been good reasons for that, it has nevertheless led to friction and ill feelings. I want to change that. And so . . ." He rose, leaned over the desk, opened the top drawer, and pulled out the journal. He then sat back down and handed it to Johnny. "I didn't actually lie about having it. I said it was being studied. I just didn't say by whom. That was misleading, though."

Johnny lowered his head to hide a small smile at his dad repeating his very thoughts in his very words.

Harold went on. "The truth is, *I've* been studying it. The researchers overseas provided me with several vocabulary and alphabetical templates, some of them quite fascinating, like this one here." He reached over and opened the journal to a section containing only horizontal and vertical hashmarks.

"This is called 'Ogham,'" Johnny's father told him. "It's an

ancient alphabet from Ireland, more than 1,600 years old. The different combinations of these hashmarks make up the letters. For instance, this one that looks like a plus sign (+) is the letter *A*. Two plus signs stacked on top of each other (‡) is an *O*. Three stacked plus signs is a *U*, four is an *E*, and five is an *I*. The rest of the letters have their own unique hashmark groupings. Sometimes, the marks were carved into the edge of a stone structure so that the edge became the vertical line. See?"

Harold demonstrated with a drawing, and Johnny thought all this was just about the neatest thing he had seen since he and Emmy found the hobo code drawings and Underground Railroad symbols around town last October. And he had a sudden, newfound admiration for his father, who, he realized, truly was a brilliant man.

"This is amazing, Dad!" Johnny exclaimed. "You've actually translated this?"

"Some of it," Harold replied. "And other sections using the different translation templates."

"Have you learned anything new?"

"Yes, actually, some very interesting things."

"Like what?" Johnny could barely contain his excitement.

"Well, it's not anything I want to mention just yet," Harold demurred. "I need to do more translating and research." He coughed. "And to that end, I'm asking you to turn over the journal to me again."

Johnny's smile faded. "What?"

"What's more," Harold continued, "I'm also asking you to turn over the cloth to me."

Johnny's features hardened, and he hugged the journal to his chest. "I knew it! I *knew* it—"

Harold held up his hand. "Now, wait! Hear me out!"

Johnny clasped the journal tightly, seething, breathing in and out through his nostrils, glaring daggers at his father but saying nothing.

Harold continued. "The journal and the cloth are of inestimable value, both as historical artifacts and as religious objects. They need greater protection than a flimsy old trunk.

I propose that we put both items in a lockbox at the bank."

"Barrymore Banking and Trust hasn't proved to be the most secure place, in case you hadn't noticed, Father," Johnny said.

Harold nodded. "I know. I'm not talking about Barrymore Bank. I'm talking about the Bank of Durham."

Johnny relaxed a bit, intrigued. "Durham?"

"Yes. It's far more sophisticated and state-of-the-art than Barrymore." He put his hand on Johnny's knee and gripped it firmly. "Listen, son. I'm asking for your trust. I know that's a tall order, given our recent history. But there needs to be more transparency between us. So, here's what I'm proposing: We lock up the journal and the cloth in the Bank of Durham. We will both keep a key to the lockbox. In fact, we'll get a lockbox where we have to use both of our keys to get into it—for added protection. I will share with you what I learn from my journal translation, at my discretion."

Johnny started to balk, but Harold held up a hand. "I promise to reveal everything I find, but only when I think you're ready to hear it. That is my Christian duty and responsibility as your father. Do you understand?"

Johnny took a breath and let it out slowly, processing everything his father just said as the air whistled out. Harold had made a compelling, reasoned, logical case, one that Johnny couldn't really refuse. What's more, Harold was right. It was his Christian duty to obey his father and show him honor.

Harold rose. "So, what do you say?"

Johnny also rose and nodded. "I say . . . yes." He held out his hand.

His father smiled, then took and shook Johnny's hand. "You keep the journal. Lock it in your trunk with the cloth. Tomorrow I'll pick you up from school in the afternoon, and we'll drive up to the Bank of Durham together."

Johnny nodded, glad he wouldn't have to explain that the cloth was no longer in the trunk but under the floorboards of his closet. He headed for the door, and then turned back and said, "Dad?"

"Yes, son?"

"I apologize to you, too."

Harold lowered his head for a moment, then crossed the room and hugged his son.

And this time, Johnny hugged back.

The next three weeks (most of March) were some of the most pleasant—and incredible—ones Johnny had experienced since his family moved to Provenance last year.

One extraordinary proof was that he couldn't believe he'd ever thought basketball was a boring, useless sport. In the hands of someone like Victor Farnsworth, it was magical. Each of his games was more exciting than the last one, and Victor performed some truly remarkable feats during them. In one game against UNC, Victor scored 33 points to bring his team from a 10-point deficit to a 5-point win. In another game against North Carolina State, Victor had a triple-double—30 points, 15 rebounds, 10 steals—to lead his team to a 12-point win. And in the next game against Wake Forest, Victor scored 40 points—three more than the other team's total! He was an unstoppable force, and it's no exaggeration to say that he almost single-handedly led Duke to sweep the tournament and secure the number one spot for the playoffs!

Hate basketball? Johnny thought. *Not anymore! I* love *basketball!*

The closer Duke came to winning the championship, the happier everyone was, at home and at school. Even Lisa seemed to regain her natural buoyancy; she stopped scowling at Johnny when they passed each other in the hallways, though she did retain a slight sneer. The teachers, the staff, and the principal were all much friendlier, and Lazlo practically treated Johnny like a kid brother.

The only sour note remained Wilson, who looked positively ill. He even snapped at Emmy when she showed concern for him, and then he ran off, telling her to let him be. Johnny had a suspicion about Wilson's erratic behavior, based on the paper Wilson dropped several weeks back. But he had

no proof, so he kept his conclusions to himself.

And as wonderful as the basketball season had become, the change in Steve was even better. On subsequent visits to the Phantasmic Confabulator, Johnny and the crew took Steve and Paul through several additional Bible adventures. The more stories they performed, the more Steve seemed affected by them, especially the stories of Jesus healing the sick. Particularly moving was the story of the woman who had bled continually for twelve years but, after touching the hem of Jesus' robe, was healed in an instant.

Johnny knew Steve was moved by it because Steve so wished that he himself could be healed. Johnny felt connected to the story because it was rock-solid proof that the cloth he found in his grandfather's trunk truly was from the robe of Jesus Christ! Healing power went out through it! Wow!

The last weekend of the month was the real turning point. The adventure that week was the Passion of the Christ, and Johnny, Ben, and Emmy pulled out all the stops. Steve came alone this time; Paul didn't want to experience it.

Steve witnessed Jesus' death and resurrection, and this time Johnny performed Jesus' words from the cross, though he felt he could never do them, or the story itself, justice. But when he cried out, "My God! My God! Why hast Thou forsaken me?" and "It . . . is . . . finished!" as the image of Maerten van Heemskerck's painting *The Crucifixion* blazed on the sheets all around them, Steve bowed his head.

He kept it bowed through the rumbling of the earthquake, the splitting of the curtain, and the howling of the wind. He only looked up to read his line as the angel at the tomb: "Why seek ye the living with the dead? He is not here; He is risen, as He said."

When the adventure ended, Steve said nothing, even as they wheeled him out of the shed and down the street toward his home. It was only as they neared his house that he said quietly, "Jesus really did that, didn't He? Die for our sins, die for *my* sins?" Johnny started to answer, but Steve stopped him. "No, don't say anything. I need to figure this out on my own."

On the road back to his own home, Johnny contemplated this, and at church the next morning he prayed fervently for Steve. As he did, a phrase entered his thoughts, the same one he had heard when Ben was in trouble:

"Help him."

Help Steve? He was trying to do that with the Phantasmic Confabulator adventures. How else could he help him? And the idea that had been in the back of his brain for several days now came forward *strongly*.

The cloth.

He had tried it before and it hadn't worked, but the idea latched on like a pit bull and wouldn't let go. Johnny believed that God wanted him to use the cloth to heal Steve.

After dinner, when Charlie went upstairs to play, Johnny went to his parents and told them of the events of the morning. Then, he got to the point of it: "Dad, Fiona, I want to tell Steve Mangle the truth about the cloth."

Harold, poker-faced, glanced over to see Fiona's reaction. Her lips were pursed, her countenance distressed. "Well, John Avery," she said, "ye already know my feelings on the matter. The cloth may be a marvel, but I dinna think it should be used by anyone. Ever. Your heart's in the right place, lad, and I love you for it. But 'help him' is so . . ."

She searched for the word, which Harold supplied: "Ambiguous."

Fiona nodded. "Right! It could mean many things! There are lots of ways you can help Steve, after all. Think of how Joshua helped Moses and Jonathan helped David. Besides, from what I understand, ye've already been helping Steve—with his faith. Ye tried the cloth on him once, and it dinna work. And what if the cloth changed nothing? Ye could be doing more harm than good."

"I know, Fiona, and I appreciate what you're saying," Johnny replied. "But I think this is different. I think it's the right thing to do."

Harold said, "John, we just put the cloth in the lockbox, in part to keep it away from people. Now you want to tell a new person about it? And don't forget who this new person is: the

son of a man who *desperately* wants the cloth."

Johnny *had* forgotten about that. Even if Steve was innocent, Karl Mangle couldn't be trusted. Johnny tried a new tack. "But if Steve is healed, then Mr. Mangle won't care about the cloth anymore, will he?"

Harold shook his head. "I wish it were that simple, son. I'm going to tell you something I recently learned about my colleague Karl. He's obsessed with an organization called the Center of Scientific Understanding, or C.O.S.U. It's a secretive conglomerate of scholars, scientists, and high-ranking government officials from around the world. I don't know much about the organization—most non-members don't. But what I have learned makes my skin crawl. One of their goals is, and this is a quote from their purpose statement, 'to make people better.' And here's the scary part: 'by any means necessary.'

"I know they have geneticists and eugenicists on their board of directors. Karl's not a member, but he very much wants to be. Up to now, they've rejected him. So far, he's only *suspected* we have the cloth. But if you use it on Steve, and it heals him, then Karl will definitely *know* we have it. And once that happens, I believe he'll stop at nothing to get it. It'll be his ticket into the C.O.S.U.

"And if *they* get the cloth, who knows what evil they would do with it? So, to answer your question: no. Even if the cloth did work on Steve, it wouldn't mitigate Professor Mangle's drive to possess it."

Fiona shook her head in horror, unable to speak. Johnny was dumbstruck at the information too, and—he had to admit—rather fascinated by this organization. Was it really so wrong to want to make people better? The "by any means necessary" part was strange, to be sure, but Johnny honestly didn't see why his parents were so horrified by the statement. After all, the cloth was one of those means, and it was a garment worn by Jesus Christ. Jesus was the ultimate good, so how could using His robe to heal *also* not be good?

Johnny was more than a little irritated, as well, that his father kept using the word *we* in reference to the possession of

the cloth—as though it belonged to both of them, when Harold knew full well it didn't. But Johnny kept all these thoughts and feelings to himself, instead refocusing on what had happened that morning at church: the call to help Steve. Johnny sighed, exasperated.

Harold laid a hand on Johnny's shoulder. "I know this isn't what you wanted to hear, son. And I'm not telling you to *not* use the cloth."

Fiona frowned and grunted disapprovingly at that.

Johnny's eyes widened. His father was certainly full of surprises today.

Harold continued. "What I *am* asking you to do is *wait*. Take a bit more time to contemplate on the subject. Think more on it. And consider carefully what your mother and I have said. You're a thoughtful young man. We trust you'll come to the right decision."

Johnny mused on his father's instruction for a moment, his eyes darting about in thought. Then he puckered his lips, nodded, and said sincerely, "Thank you for your trust." He hoped the words didn't sound trite; he meant them. "I really would like to go see how Steve is doing, though, if that's all right."

Fiona said nothing, but Harold agreed. "Of course. Just be careful."

"I will," Johnny called back, already halfway out the door.

The sun beat down on him with a heat that had been on vacation for too long. Johnny walked slowly, soaking in the rays as though they offered their own brand of nourishment. He replayed the conversation with his parents again, partly because he deeply appreciated the trust his father confided in him. Johnny's gut instinct hadn't changed, though; he still believed he should tell Steve about the cloth and see again if it might heal him.

He had to admit, however, that there was merit in what his parents said as well, though he didn't completely understand their extreme reticence. Especially his father's. Harold was a scholar, after all, and a brilliant one. Didn't some part of *him* want to be in the C.O.S.U. too? "I must be

missing something," Johnny muttered.

Then it dawned on him: Perhaps that was the problem. His parents were older, and with age comes wisdom and experience. They had put their trust in him to make the right decision; perhaps he should trust their experience and wisdom as well? He knew the answer before he finished forming the question: *Of course* he should. He heaved another exasperated sigh and muttered, "Fine, I'll keep quiet about the cloth and try to figure out some other way to help Steve."

The warmer weather meant more families were outside playing or visiting on the front porch with neighbors. Johnny knew this could be a "false spring"—that winter likely wasn't done yet and may even have one or two more snows left in it. But he was ready for full-blown spring, no doubt about it.

He rounded the corner of Brewster Lane onto Custer Avenue, and when the Mangle home came into view, Johnny suddenly felt uneasy (or was it dread?) as he approached the house. He wasn't sure why, but the last several times, when walking up to the door, a strange foreboding had come over him. Johnny sensed that the building was—how to describe it?—*alive*. He couldn't escape the sensation that something, some *presence*, hovered like a dark, foul cloud, not only over but also inside the home.

Hackles raised, Johnny lifted his fist to knock on the door when a pesky goldfinch swooped down from its nest in the eaves just above him. He jumped back with a breathless yelp and watched the bird fly to the bare branch of a nearby sweet gum tree.

Beneath the tree sat Steve in his wheelchair, with his back to Johnny. He seemed to be staring into the stand of trees just beyond.

Johnny quickly jogged over, calling out, "You look like you're pondering the mysteries of the universe over here." When he reached Steve, Johnny looked down to see more than a few tears falling down his friend's cheeks.

"Are you all right? Has something happened?"

"Yes," Steve answered. "And *you're* to blame for it."

"Me? What did *I* do?"

Steve's gaze returned to what Johnny realized was a break in the trees. The view opened up to a billowy cloud, tinged orange and yellow. "I came outside to read," Steve said.

Johnny saw an old, oft-used copy of *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* lying facedown on Steve's lap. "I thought it'd be fun to read in the warm sun instead of cooped up in my stuffy room. I was at a really good part when this guy came by and asked me for directions to a good place to eat. Said his name was Domingo."

"I've never heard that name," Johnny said.

Steve shot a side glance at Johnny. "Me neither, so I asked him what it meant. He said, 'Born on the Lord's Day.' He's hiking the coast. He started in Florida where he's from and is going all the way to some city in Maine." Steve paused and then added, "Of course, you already know all that."

"Me? How could I know?"

"You sent him to see me."

Johnny's face scrunched up into one big, confused expression. "What on earth are you talking about?"

"Come on, I'm no dope! 'Hiking the coast'? We're 120 miles from the coast! He asked me why I was in my wheelchair, and after I told him, he began talking about God and faith and eternity."

Johnny was even more surprised, but also a bit excited. He looked Steve square in the eye and said, "On my honor, I've never met the guy."

Steve frowned. "Then why did he bring up the *exact same* Bible stories we've been doing in the Phantasmic Confabulator?"

Johnny wasn't much of one to believe in coincidences, even before he became a Christian. He had always supposed they were a fluke, with no connection between the events, or the unusual odds of similarities occurring for unknown scientific reasons—like one person being hit by lightning multiple times, or something happening shortly after merely thinking of it. But now that he was a Christian, Johnny was sure there was no such thing as coincidence. And Steve's story felt more like God's fingerprint. "I promise you," Johnny told

him, “it wasn’t me. But I wonder if Someone else sent this guy to you.”

“You mean God,” Steve said, looking back through the break in the trees. “That’s what I think too,” he added softly.

Johnny’s heart began racing. “Why do you think He would do that?”

The cloud that gripped Steve’s attention had morphed and now included a reddish tinge. “Because I’m supposed to become a Christian,” he said matter-of-factly, as if he were answering a math question.

Now Johnny’s heart almost stopped. He didn’t know what to say. His mind scrambled for words, and fumbling about he said, “So, well, what do you mean by, you know, ‘supposed to’?”

Steve gestured to the cloud. “See that? It looks normal now. But when Domingo was leaving, he said that God loved me and wanted me to join His family. And I know this sounds crazy, or as though I imagined it, but . . .”

Johnny leaned in. “But what?”

“I saw a *face* in that cloud. And somehow, I knew it was the face of Jesus. And . . .” Steve started to weep again. “He was *smiling*. Jesus was smiling at *me*! I know He was!”

Johnny said nothing, letting the holiness of the moment speak to both of them.

A minute or two later, Steve looked back at Johnny. “Whether you sent Domingo or not, you started all this.”

Johnny smiled at Steve, tears welling up in his own eyes.

“Those stories we’ve been doing,” Steve said, “I haven’t been able to get them out of my mind.” He looked up at the cloud again. “I don’t *want* them out of my mind.” The cloud passed behind a grove of distant trees, leaving only a clear blue sky. “Help me,” Steve said. “Help me become a Christian.”

A shiver went down Johnny’s spine. *This* was how he could help Steve—the very *best* way to help him! *Thank You, God!* he thought. Johnny knelt on the grass beside Steve’s wheelchair and led Steve in a prayer.

So, on that lovely “false-spring” March day, Steve Mangle

became a new creation.

A child of God.

Chapter Nineteen

After rejoicing with Steve, Johnny returned home, elated and praising God the whole way. He didn't know who this Domingo person was, but he now had no doubt that God was working in all their lives and had brought them together for Steve. Johnny prayed that his friend would be able to share his new faith with his brother and parents and that they would not just approve but even become followers of Jesus themselves.

"Who knows where this may lead?" Johnny all but hollered. "God is so *good*!"

When he told his parents what had happened, they, too, praised God. Johnny hugged his stepmother and said, "You were right, Fiona! Steve didn't care about healing or being cured—he cared about Jesus! That was the best way to help him!"

Fiona brushed away tears of joy and said, "Aye, John Avery. When you're a child of God, the healing in this life doesn't matter as much anymore. Steve's soul is secure, and he'll certainly be healed and whole for all eternity."

Harold beamed at him. "I'm very proud of you, son. Very proud indeed."

Johnny felt like laughing and crying joyfully at the same time.

The rest of that week, everyone at school and around town was abuzz about the Tobacco Road Tournament championship game between Duke and the University of North Carolina. UNC was the only school that had given Duke a run for its money the whole tournament; in fact, Duke nearly lost a game to UNC along the way. It promised to be a great event, and Johnny couldn't wait to see Victor in action again.

But on Thursday, the day before the championship game, something strange happened. Lazlo, who had been boasting and bragging about his great brother all week to anyone who would listen, didn't come to school. Normally this would have been a blessing—it meant far fewer bumps and bruises for the smaller kids who got in his way.

But when he also didn't show up on Friday—game day—Johnny thought it very odd. Though a bully, Lazlo had also never been more popular at Brookhaven, a benefit of Victor's hero status. Johnny asked around, but none of Lazlo's usual gang had seen him, nor had any of the teachers.

"Maybe the excitement is getting to be too much for him," Emmy suggested.

"I don't think so," Johnny replied. "Lazlo wouldn't miss out on all the attention unless he was sick or something else is amiss."

His suspicion proved to be correct. That afternoon, as he and Emmy walked home from school, Victor raced up in his car and pulled over next to them, tires squealing. He jumped out and exclaimed, "Whittaker, you gotta help me! I don't know what to do!" He looked to be near tears.

Both Johnny and Emmy calmed him and sat him on the curb. Emmy sat next to Victor, holding his hand, and Johnny said, "Now tell us what's going on."

With a shaky hand, Victor pulled an envelope from his pocket. "I got this in the mail this morning." He gave it to Johnny, who opened it.

Inside was a picture of Lazlo, trussed up in a chair, looking very frightened. A typed note was taped to the picture:

"If you ever want to see your little brother alive again, you'll throw the championship game. This ain't no joke. No cops, neither."

There was one other item in the envelope: a high school graduation ring. "That's mine," Victor said, his voice cracking. "I let Lazlo wear it for good luck." He sniffed and wiped his eyes.

"Lazlo didn't come home last night. I didn't think anything about it. Sometimes he sleeps in the barn or in an old shack we have out back. But he always shows up for breakfast, and he didn't this morning. And then I got these." He pointed to the picture, note, and ring. He looked up at Johnny pleadingly. "I should just do what the note says, right? No police. Throw the game, right? I know you're just a kid, but you always know what to do! Tell me what to do! *Please*!"

"You definitely need to go to the sheriff!" Emmy exclaimed. "The note must be a bluff! I can't believe someone would hurt a kid over a ball game!"

"They might if money is involved," Johnny mused.

"Money? What money?"

"It's only a hunch," Johnny replied. "But I think I know how to prove it. Or, more to the point, I know *who* can prove it."

"Who?" asked Emmy.

"The *other* person who wasn't in school today," Johnny replied.

Wilson Knox crouched as far down as he could in a back booth at Hoops Diner. He had just finished his fourth piece of berry pie and third soda, and he was looking a bit green around the gills. He tried to lie down, but the booth bench was too small. He closed his eyes and moaned. "Oooo . . ."

"Feeling sick, are you?" a familiar voice said.

Wilson's eyes snapped open, and he scrunched down even

more. Johnny, Emmy, and the lanky, muscular Victor were peering down on him. “What do y’all want?” he simpered.

Before Johnny could reply, Victor pushed roughly past him and Emmy, grabbed Wilson by the collar, lifted him out of the booth over the table, and roared in his face, “*Where’s my brother?*”

Wilson turned even more green. “How should I know? Leggo of me!”

The waitress behind the counter yelled at them. “Hey! Y’all take that outside or I’ll call the sheriff!”

Johnny and Emmy each grabbed one of Victor’s arms and tugged at him. “Victor, wait!” Emmy said.

“Let’s go out back!” Johnny added.

Victor glanced at them and then half-dragged/half-carried the whimpering Wilson out the back door and into the alley, lifting him off the ground. “*Where’s Lazlo?*” he bellowed.

“I dunno!” Wilson bellowed back. “Leave me alone—aaaah!” Victor shook him like a limp doll. “Quit it! I dunno, I tell ya! Quit it!” Wilson’s voice shook. He was near tears.

Johnny clasped Victor’s wrist. “Let him go, Victor! Drop him!”

Prying Victor’s grip loose would have been as impossible—and dangerous—as wrenching a gazelle from a crocodile’s mouth. Fortunately, Johnny didn’t have to try. Victor, jaw clenched, rage in his eyes, yelled angrily and flung Wilson to the ground. Wilson cowered there, panting like a dog and looking as if he was about to throw up.

“I’m gonna be sick! I’m gonna be sick!” Wilson mewled.

Emmy crouched next to him and put a hand on his shoulder. “No, you’re not. You just need to breathe and calm down.”

At her touch, Wilson’s breathing became more regular, though he still looked pathetic. “I shoulda stayed in the woods,” he whined.

“Why didn’t you?” Emmy asked.

“I got hungry!”

“Why were you hiding in the woods in the first place?” Johnny asked.

“I wasn’t hidin’!” Wilson snapped, then gulped. “I was just stayin’ away from some people I didn’t wanna see.”

“Mm-hm,” Johnny grunted. “Those people wouldn’t be gamblers, would they?”

Emmy and Victor looked at Johnny, shocked. Wilson looked alarmed. “How’d you know?”

Emmy jerked back her hand from his shoulder as if it were a nest of scorpions. “Gamblers?”

Victor frowned. “You’ve been betting on the games?”

“Worse than that,” Johnny clarified, “he’s been betting against Duke—more specifically, against *you*. Isn’t that right, Wilson?”

Victor kicked Wilson’s foot. “Answer him!”

“Yes! Yes! All right!”

Emmy rose and put her hands on her hips. Johnny thought how grown-up she looked doing that. “Oh, Wilson!” she scolded. “How *could* you!”

“I needed the money!” Wilson moaned, then added, “I owed them.”

“That’s what happens when you get involved with professional gamblers,” Johnny said.

Wilson clambered to his feet. “They ain’t professionals. They’re my cousins.”

Emmy snorted derisively. Johnny shook his head. “Quite a family you have.”

“They run a local betting ring,” Wilson explained. “More like a racket, really. I bet all the allowance I’d saved against Duke in the first game.”

“Why?” Victor asked.

“’Cause Lazlo told me you were denser than dirt when it came to science!” Victor lowered his eyes. “I didn’t think there was any way someone like *him*”—Wilson gestured to Johnny—“could teach anything to someone like *you*!” He eyeballed Victor. “If you didn’t pass, you didn’t play, and if you didn’t play, Duke didn’t stand a chance.” He took a ragged and shallow breath. “Who knew you were smarter than anyone thought you were?”

“Johnny did,” said Emmy.

"'Course he did. He spoils everything." Wilson snorted.

Johnny smiled. "So, Victor passed the test and led Duke to the win—and just like that, you owed your cousins money."

Wilson nodded bitterly. "I thought 'cause they were family, they'd forget about the debt. Or at least give me a break." He scoffed. "Fat chance. 'Family or no, you still gotta pay up,'" he mocked. "But I don't have that kinda money!"

"What'd you do?" Emmy asked.

"He joined the family business," Johnny replied. "You became a bookie yourself, didn't you?"

Wilson was stunned. "How—?"

"The paper you dropped and then snatched away from me when you came out of the store that day," Johnny replied. "It looked like a code. I didn't have it long enough to decipher it, but then when you kept going back to the shopkeepers and teachers and writing stuff down in your notebook after talking with them, I figured it probably had something to do with betting."

Now Emmy was stunned. "The shopkeepers?"

Johnny nodded. "And some teachers, too."

Emmy threw up her hands. "What town do I live in?"

"One that likes to bet against me," Victor said quietly. "That's what you got everyone to do, isn't it?"

"Not everybody," Wilson replied. "But enough. I took bets that you wouldn't pass the second test and wouldn't be able to play in the Tobacco Road Tournament."

"That's why you were bad-mouthing us to anyone who would listen," Johnny said. "Trying to break my confidence as a tutor and sabotage the sessions so Victor would fail."

"And now I owe my cousins more than ever!" Wilson grumbled. "I just wanted enough money to pay them back."

Victor grabbed him by the shirt again. "And you thought you could get clean by helping them kidnap my brother? Hold him hostage to make sure I throw the championship game?"

Wilson's eyes widened, and fear took over his face. "W-what? What are you talking about?"

"You know what I'm talking about!" Victor's face grew red with rage.

"I don't! Lazlo's been *kidnapped*?"

Johnny held up the picture of Lazlo.

Wilson paled. "Oh, no! No!"

"C'mon, Wilson," Johnny demanded, pushing the picture closer to Wilson's face. "The jig is up! Tell us where he is!"

"I can't! I—I don't know! I don't! Honest!" He looked away from the picture, near tears.

Emmy put a hand on Victor's arm. "Victor," she said. "Let him go."

Victor looked at her, and Emmy nodded reassuringly. He released his grip on Wilson, who stepped back, shaking.

Emmy now took hold of Wilson's arm, albeit much more gently. "Look at me, Wilson." He did, his features carved with fear and distress. Emmy continued, her voice calm. "This is *me* talking to you now. I want you to tell me the truth. Did you have anything to do with Lazlo's disappearance?"

Wilson stared into her eyes, and his face turned desperate. He took a few short breaths and said as sincerely as he could, "No! I don't know anything about it, Emmy! I know I've done a lot of things, but I'd never do something like that! You've gotta believe me!"

Emmy nodded, patted him on the arm, and turned to the others. Johnny was convinced that Wilson was telling the truth—he didn't think Wilson would lie to Emmy. Johnny glanced at Victor, who had calmed considerably but still didn't seem fully convinced.

Johnny took a step toward Wilson and said in a low voice, "Prove it."

Wilson looked wide-eyed again. "H-how?"

"By helping us get Lazlo back," Johnny said evenly.

Wilson's head bobbed up and down rapidly. "Yes! Of course! Whaddya want me to do? I'll do anything!"

"You can start by telling us if you recognize anything in this picture. Besides Lazlo, I mean. Does anything look familiar?" Victor asked.

Wilson studied the photo for a few seconds, and his eyes brightened. "Yes! I do! That picture on the wall—it's my cousins' place!"

“Good,” Johnny replied. “Take us there.”

Wilson’s shoulders sank, and dread washed over his face. “I knew you were gonna say that.” Then he mumbled to himself, “I shoulda stayed in the woods!”

But he straightened taller, ran his hand nervously through his hair, nodded, and said, “Okay. Follow me.”

Chapter Twenty

Wilson took them to a cabin in the woods on the outskirts of town, not far from where Arrie, one of the bank robbers, had lived. While the others hid about a hundred yards away, Johnny sneaked up to the cabin and looked through a slit in the blinds. But the only familiar thing he could see was the picture on the wall that Wilson pointed out in the kidnapping photo. He went back and reported this to the others.

"At least we know this is the right place," Emmy said.

"I toldja!" said Wilson.

"But no Lazlo?" asked Victor.

"Not in that room," Johnny replied. "They probably moved him to another one, but I couldn't see into any other room."

"Look out!" Wilson hissed.

They all ducked behind bushes as a car drove by them and up to the cabin and stopped. The driver, a surly-looking man, got out. "That's my cousin Arlo," whispered Wilson. Arlo grabbed a paper bag from the car. It split, and the contents spilled on the ground. He whacked the car door angrily, bent down, gathered up the foodstuff, and entered the cabin.

"Lazlo's definitely in there!" Victor whispered.

"How do you know?" Wilson asked.

"Did you see what was in the bag? Cheese puffs, those crème-filled sponge cake things, and a container of fruit punch! Does that sound like stuff your tough-guy gambler cousins eat?"

"Well, maybe the cheese puffs."

"Lazlo has those kinds of things for breakfast. He's in there all right!"

"I still say we should get the sheriff," Emmy said.

"I'm not so sure," Wilson responded. "My cousins are as bad-tempered as they look. If the law comes, there's no telling what they'd do."

"Maybe I should just go in," Victor suggested. "If I'm in there, they'll know I'm not playing in the game."

"But what if Duke still wins?" Johnny replied. "Remember the note? They want you to *throw* the game, not just play in it. To go to these lengths, they've obviously made a big wager against Duke and are counting on you to sabotage the game."

"Then what can we do?" asked Emmy.

"We need a different strategy," Johnny answered. "And I think I might have one."

"I'm not surprised," Victor said. "What's your plan?"

"Well, first," Johnny replied, "it's getting late. You need to go get ready."

"For what?"

"The game! What's more, you need to play like you always do—to win!"

Victor frowned. "I can't do that! Not until I know Lazlo's safe!"

Johnny grabbed his arm. "We each have jobs to do here, Victor. You go do yours and leave this one to us." Victor hesitated, searching Johnny's eyes for understanding. Johnny told him, "You've trusted me all semester, Victor. Trust me now. Go. And win that game!"

There was an anxious pause as Victor wrestled with his decision. Wilson shrugged. Emmy smiled. Johnny nodded confidently. Victor exhaled, then said, "Okay. I'll trust you. Just . . . help him. Please." And with that, he turned, still in a

crouch, and ran back to where he had parked his car off the road.

Once Victor was gone, Emmy said, “Are you *sure* we shouldn’t get the sheriff?”

“We will,” Johnny replied, “but not just yet. First, we need to get Wilson’s cousins to believe that Duke is losing, and that Victor is making it happen.”

“And just how are we gonna do that?” Wilson asked skeptically.

“Well, aside from the photo on the wall, the one other thing I was able to see through the slit in the blinds was that your cousins have a farm radio in the cabin set right in front of a window. That’s how they listen to the games, isn’t it?”

“I guess. So?”

“So, farm radios run off of batteries.” Johnny peered at the cabin and then pointed at it. “There! See that big wire hanging down from that window? One end is connected to the radio inside, and the other end is connected to those big jars next to the outside wall. Those are the batteries. The jars are filled with sulfuric acid. It stinks to high heaven, which is why they keep them outside.”

“Thanks for the science lesson, professor,” Wilson said. “But how does any of this help us?”

“It’s how we’ll get your cousins to believe Victor is throwing the game. Emmy, go get Ben, and then the two of you meet Wilson and me at my house.”

Emmy nodded. “Right!” She took off in a crouched run.

“The janitor?” sneered Wilson. “What’s he gonna do, clean up the cabin?”

Johnny scowled at him. “He’s a lot more than a janitor, and we need his help.” He thought for a moment. “We’ll also need some components from the Phantasmic Confabulator.” He looked back at Wilson and poked a finger in his chest. “And *your* acting chops. We don’t have much time. Let’s go!”

Once they had gathered the items they needed from the Phantasmic Confabulator shed, Johnny, Ben, and Emmy

surreptitiously set things up back at their spot near the Knox cousins' cabin. Johnny took a small speaker on a long cable and sneaked up to the cabin again, this time on the side with the window. He skillfully detached the wire from the batteries, then carefully inched open the window that the wire was threaded through and positioned the speaker directly behind the radio. He gave Ben and the others a thumbs-up, and they gave him one in return. He then signaled for them to stand by.

Dusk was falling. Johnny heard voices coming from the cabin, then saw a flare of light. He peered in the window, and though his vision was limited, he caught a glimpse of Arlo holding a lit lantern.

"It's almost time," Arlo drawled in a raspy voice. "Turn on the box, Woodrow."

A shadowy figure moved toward the window and the radio. Johnny ducked down and signaled toward the others. The timing had to be perfect. He heard Woodrow click on the power switch and signaled Ben to switch on their components. Ben did. There were a few seconds of delay, and then the small speaker hissed to life, along with the sound effect of a cheering crowd.

"Sounds like the game's about ta start already!" Woodrow's nasal twang droned.

"It's early," Arlo replied. "Good thing we turned it on, eh, boy?"

"Yaaah," said a muffled voice. Johnny would know it anywhere, muffled or not. It was Lazlo's.

Johnny waved to the others wildly, then gave them two big thumbs up. Wilson's best announcer voice quickly filtered through the speaker. "Hello, basketball fans, and welcome to the Tobacco Road Tournament championship between the Duke University Blue Devils and the University of North Carolina Tar Heels." Wilson had affected his naturally deep voice to the point where even Johnny barely recognized him.

He really is a good actor, Johnny thought with a pang of jealousy. *But will he fool his cousins?*

"New announcer this time," Arlo growled.

“Yeah,” Woodrow twanged. “Sounds familiar, though. Whatchu think, boy?”

“I dunno,” Lazlo replied, still muffled.

He must be gagged, Johnny thought. But he was also relieved that Wilson and Ben were pulling it off. The ruse was underway, and it seemed to be working.

Wilson continued his announcer duties, and Johnny had to admit it was a remarkable performance. Between Wilson’s acting and Ben’s sound effects (with Emmy’s help), the game sounded so exciting, Johnny almost wished it were real. Through the first two quarters, Wilson had Victor scoring at will, prompting Arlo to scoff, “Mebbe yo’ brother don’t care ’bout you as much as you think he does.”

Woodrow hee-hawed.

At the half, Wilson had the game all tied up. But then in the second half, he announced that Victor was throwing errant passes and missing easy layups—both quite unlike him. The cousins chuckled. “Maybe we *all* gon’ git what we want after all!” Woodrow squeaked.

Johnny did a double take. *All* getting what they want? A thought struck him, and his jaw instantly dropped.

Right then, the speaker slipped and fell to the ground with a thud, and the window in which it was propped slammed down onto the thick farm radio battery wire with a clatter.

Chapter Twenty-One

Everyone froze, and then Johnny heard Arlo and Woodrow shoot out the door like a bullet. Johnny tried to grab the speaker and run, but it was nearly dark by now, and he got tangled in the cable.

Arlo reached him first and grabbed him by the shirt collar. He saw the cable and shook Johnny violently. “What’s this? Where’s this lead to?”

Woodrow peered out into the darkness. “Over yonder, Arlo! Someone just put out a lamp!”

“Come here right now, whoever you are!” Arlo hollered. “I mean it! Come here or I’m gonna hurt this boy real bad!”

From the distance, a voice yelled back, “No! Don’t! I’m comin’!” There were heavy footsteps and a body crashing through the bushes, and Wilson appeared in the dim light from the cabin window.

“You?” Woodrow squealed. He lumbered over and grabbed Wilson by his collar.

“Ow!” Wilson winced. “Easy, Woodrow!”

“What’s goin’ on, boy?” Arlo demanded. “You better explain yo’self, and I mean *right now*!”

Wilson looked pleadingly at Johnny, who nodded. “Go

ahead and tell them," Johnny said.

Wilson paled. "We've been puttin' you on."

Arlo and Woodrow exchanged looks. "Whatchu talking 'bout?" Woodrow said.

Wilson and Johnny explained everything, but Johnny omitted the fact that Ben and Emmy were also in on it, hoping they had gone to the police. That hope was bolstered when Johnny and Wilson took the cousins to the equipment out in the woods. Neither Ben nor Emmy was anywhere to be seen.

Arlo jerked Johnny around. "You're that real smart kid, ain'tcha? The one Willie's always talkin' 'bout. I know fer a fact he ain't brainy 'nough to come up with a scheme like this!"

"Hey now!" Wilson protested.

"Hush!" Woodrow snapped. "What I wanna know is *why*? Why'd you do this?"

"You know why!" Wilson bawled. "Y'all got Lazlo Farnsworth trussed up in that cabin, and you're gonna hurt 'im if his brother doesn't throw the championship game!"

Arlo and Woodrow shared a bemused exchange. Arlo nodded toward the cabin, and Woodrow shoved Wilson toward it. "Git inside there, botha you! Go on—git!"

They all headed toward the cabin door, but before they got there, Arlo veered Johnny off toward the window. "You hook our battery back up first!"

"No, Whittaker!" Wilson called out. "The real game's still going on!"

"That's right. And we all wanna hear how it turns out!" Woodrow barked.

"It's all right, Wilson," Johnny said calmly. Woodrow shoved Wilson hard toward the door, and Arlo manhandled Johnny toward the batteries. He reconnected the wire quickly, and then Arlo marched him inside the cabin as well.

The place was a mess. Food wrappers and empty juice cans littered the floor all around a dining room chair in which sat a bound and gagged Lazlo.

The radio was just warming up, and Woodrow turned the tuning dial to the game. When it got to the right position, the

game that broadcast through the speaker sounded remarkably like the fake one Wilson had announced. The real announcer explained the situation excitedly. “And with three minutes left in the game, it’s anyone’s guess as to how this game will turn out! The lead has flipped during the second half, a far cry from the dominating performance put on by Victor Farnsworth in the first half. Victor just doesn’t seem himself this half, and that has allowed the Tar Heels to get back into this game! However it turns out, this one is a contest for the ages!”

Johnny could see the arena in his mind’s eye, and he wished he could be there to watch it in person. But he knew he had a more important role to play here.

The last three minutes were a confusing jumble of plays by both teams, the lead still switching back and forth. The cousins listened intently. Sweat dripped from Wilson’s brow as he paced the floor. Lazlo sat staring at the radio, anxiety etched in his face. The announcer commented that while Victor was playing better, he still didn’t seem like himself, missing a few shots he would normally drill easily.

In the last twenty seconds, a UNC player tossed up a Hail Mary shot from half-court that somehow managed to find the bottom of the net—a perfect swish—giving the Tar Heels a one-point lead! The UNC crowd roared.

After a time out, with eleven seconds on the game clock, Duke inbounded to Victor. He worked his magic with the ball, dribbling in circles around his defender while intentionally running down the clock. When it struck at five seconds, Victor charged down the lane for a layup and was fouled hard, stopping the clock. He had somehow miraculously managed to get the shot off, though. The ball bounced around the rim and perched precariously on the edge of the hoop for a moment . . . then dropped off outside it. The Duke crowd deflated.

The announcer’s voice was coiled energy. “Two seconds left on the clock as Victor Farnsworth walks up to the free throw line. The ref hands him the ball. Victor takes three bounces, no more, no less . . . and he shoots the ball

underhanded. It's a beautiful arc. Ooh! It hits the back of the rim and bobs out! No good! . . . The tension in this arena is thick enough to cut with a knife!"

Johnny scanned the cabin. Both cousins were chewing their nails. Wilson looked like he was going to faint. Lazlo was laser focused on the radio.

The announcer continued. "Last shot. The ball goes to Victor . . . three bounces . . . a deep breath . . ."

All was quiet for a moment that seemed to last an eternity. Suddenly a loud bang came from the radio, startling everyone. The crowd came to life, as did the announcer, who rapid-fired his comments with growing energy: "A miss, but the ball ricochets off the backboard and rim and straight back to Farnsworth! He flies down the lane! He's in the air! And . . . and he slams the ball into the basket!" The buzzer blared through the speaker, and the crowd went wild! The announcer was hoarse with excitement. "And that's the buzzer! The game is over! Duke wins by one! Duke wins by one! The Blue Devils have won the Tobacco Road Tournament championship! *Oh my!* Victor Farnsworth is the hero! That boy is really going places!"

Lazlo cried out through his gag. Wilson, visibly shaken, said, "I can't believe he did it. I can't believe he'd sacrifice his own brother just to win a game!" Tears streamed down Lazlo's face, and Wilson stood stunned. His voice cracked. "I'm sorry, Lazlo."

Johnny cleared his throat. "Wilson—"

"Quiet, Whittaker!" Wilson snapped.

The cousins faced Lazlo. "Looks like he jacked us all, kid," Arlo growled.

"Yeah," Woodrow sneered. "Your brother's a real piece of work!"

More tears. Suddenly, Wilson stood in front of Lazlo. "I won't let you do it!"

Johnny tugged at his sleeve. "Wilson!"

"Get off me!" Wilson yanked his sleeve away.

Arlo laughed. "Look who's got guts all of a sudden!"

Woodrow also snickered. "You sure you wanna do this,

Willie?"

"N-no!" Wilson quavered. "But I'm gonna!"

"Wilson!" Johnny moved in front of him.

"*What*, Whittaker? Can't you see what's happening here? You're the one who keeps spouting off about being a Christian! Aren't Christians supposed to help people?"

"People who really *need* help, yes. But Lazlo doesn't—at least, not with your cousins."

Wilson scowled at Johnny as if he'd popped a cork. "How can you say that? You read the note! Victor won the game, so they're gonna hurt Lazlo!"

Johnny shook his head. "No. They're not."

Wilson looked incredulous. "What? Then why'd they kidnap him?"

"They didn't." Johnny pointed behind Wilson. "Turn around."

"Huh?"

"Turn around," Johnny insisted. Wilson did.

Lazlo still sat in the chair, only he wasn't tied up or gagged anymore. He was still crying, though, harder than ever.

Wilson stared at him for a moment, and then looked at Johnny. "How'd he get free? I—I don't get it!"

At that moment, Deputy Miller burst through the front door, pistol in hand. "Nobody move!" he bellowed. Right on his heels, several other deputies poured into the room, also armed. The cousins raised their hands. Lazlo kept sobbing. Wilson stood aside, completely baffled.

Johnny saw Emmy and Ben anxiously trying to look inside. He said, "Hi, Deputy Miller. I guess you're wondering what this is all about."

The deputies herded everyone out to the patrol cars, and in the cool, damp night air, the truth finally came out. The kidnapping was a ruse. Lazlo had set up the whole thing. But he refused to say why until his older brother arrived. In the meantime, Deputy Miller took Lazlo back inside the cabin and

shut the door behind him.

The moon lit the night, but not so much that a handful of stars couldn't be seen. Wilson rubbed his arms to warm himself and then asked Johnny, "So, how'd *you* know it was a fake kidnapping?"

"I had my suspicions when I read the note," Johnny explained. "It seemed like something Lazlo would write—the double negatives and all. Then there was the food Arlo brought. How many kidnappers bring their victims their favorite foods? Judging by the empty wrappers and cans, Lazlo had a feast. But when you were doing the fake announcing—great job, by the way—and you had Victor making mistakes like he was throwing the game, I heard Woodrow say, 'Looks like we're all gonna get what we want.' *All*—including Lazlo. That's what tipped it for me."

"But I still don't get why," Emmy said. "Lazlo's been nothing but proud of Victor this whole time, bragging and boasting on him! Why would he want him to throw the championship game?"

Victor's car pulled up and stopped, and he hopped out and walked toward them. "I think we're about to find out," Ben replied.

But before they could, Deputy Miller poked his head out of the cabin and motioned for Victor to come inside. Victor walked past the group, nodding appreciatively. Deputy Miller held the door, murmured a few things to Victor, and then walked out, shutting the door behind him. He walked over, put a hand on Johnny's shoulder, smirked, and asked, "Son, why is it that my job has gotten a whole lot busier since you arrived in town?"

Johnny smiled sheepishly. "Sorry, Deputy Miller. So, what's going on?"

"Well," Miller drawled, "nobody's being charged with kidnapping since there was no kidnapping. Your cousins'll be happy to hear about that, Mr. Knox."

"Does that mean we can go home now?" Wilson asked, hope rimming his eyes.

"Not just yet," the deputy replied. "There may not have

been a kidnapping, but there *was* illegal gamblin' goin' on. Your cousins are comin' down to the station. And so are you."

"Me?" Wilson exclaimed. "Why? What'd I do?"

"You've been taking bets from people, haven'tcha? That's bookmaking—also illegal. Let's go." Deputy Miller grabbed Wilson by the elbow and led him off.

"Oh, man!" Wilson muttered. "I gotta get a new family!"

After a few minutes, the cabin door opened, and Victor stepped out. Johnny and Emmy and Ben waited for him. "Johnny," he asked timidly, "can I talk to you for a minute?"

Emmy nudged Ben and said, "We should go gather up our stuff."

Ben nodded. "Right." He grabbed a nearby lantern, and they made their way toward the trees.

"Is Lazlo okay?" Johnny asked.

Victor nodded. "Yeah. Deputy Miller said he'll have to appear before a judge. You can't fake your own kidnapping and get away with it. But he'll probably just get a slap on the wrist."

"Why did he do it?" Johnny asked.

A sad look came over Victor's face. "Lazlo doesn't have the best home life. Neither of us does, but he's got it worse. See, our mama died when he was born, and our pop has always blamed him for it. Pop also has a problem with liquor sometimes, and when he does, well, Lazlo's his target."

"Oh," Johnny said quietly.

"I've always looked after him—sorta run interference between him and Pop. And Laz has always looked up to me for it. So, when he heard a reporter say that if I helped Duke win the championship, I'll be able to write my own ticket, get outta Podunk poverty, and move on to fame and fortune, Laz thought I'd be leaving him to face Pop alone, unprotected."

"So, he faked his own kidnapping to keep you around?" Johnny asked.

"Pretty much." Victor's face screwed up. "I'm all he has."

Johnny was deeply moved. No wonder Lazlo picked on everyone smaller than him. He was just passing on to them what he got at home. Suddenly, despite all the abuse and

bullying and meanness he had suffered at the hands of Lazlo Farnsworth, Johnny's heart broke for him, and for his brother, and he vowed then and there to pray for the Farnsworth family—even the father—every day from then on.

The cabin door opened, and Lazlo stepped out. He immediately looked for Victor, and when he saw him, headed straight for him. Victor patted Johnny on the shoulder and went over to meet his brother. The two of them got into Victor's car and pulled in behind Deputy Miller's idling patrol car. Johnny turned to go help Ben and Emmy and suddenly felt the *thwack!* of a pinecone as it caromed off his head. He whipped around and saw Lazlo laughing and pointing at him as he and Victor drove off.

Johnny growled, then shook his head and muttered, "Maybe I need to pray for Lazlo *twice* a day." He chuckled and went off to find his friends.

Chapter Twenty-Two

The cool, damp night air stuck around the whole next day, shoving back the recent spring warmup. Johnny, of course, knew the chill would stay thanks to his barometer and Fiona's aching toe joints. Still, the sky was so clear and transparent that morning, Johnny thought he could almost see the backbone of the galaxy.

He stood beside three horses at the edge of a field; two were saddled, and the last was hitched to a buggy. Emmy sat astride the smallest horse, while Steve and Paul sat next to each other in the carriage. McDuff was also with them for good measure. Emmy was dressed in a makeshift Annie Oakley costume she had cobbled together. Johnny wore a cowboy hat and had a cap gun in a holster around his waist. Paul had drawn a moustache on his lip with his mother's makeup. Steve didn't want a costume, but he was glad when Emmy offered him a long, patchwork cloak to keep him warm in the cool air. She wrapped it around him, and he snuggled down in his wheelchair secured in the carriage.

The outing was organized by Fiona to celebrate Johnny's success at tutoring, Duke's championship win, the first blooming of the cherry blossoms, and most importantly,

Steve's new life in Christ. Steve had commented several times how he always wanted to ride a horse, and though he couldn't sit on one, he could get propped up enough to sit in a buggy. For him, this was a momentous occasion.

"This here posse is on the lookout for the notorious villain Two-Gun Galoot," Johnny said with an impressive Western drawl. "And we ain't a comin' back 'til we have that varmint, be it dead or alive. It'll likely be dead."

Emmy's Western twang actually resembled her parents' Italian accent. "There'sa no reason to be crass, Sheriff Sherlock. I mean, really."

Steve called out with as much volume as he could, "Let's stop jawing and git on the trail. Daylight's burnin'!"

Paul agreed. "Right. Baylight's durnin'!"

With a tip of his hat, Johnny mounted his horse and yelled, "Posse, let's skedaddle." He pulled his cap gun from the holster on his hip, flicked his reins, and called out, "Hi-o, Aluminum! Away!" And off he trotted, Emmy, the boys, and a barking McDuff following right behind.

The next hour was chock-full of fun, laughter, and joking. They not only caught the bandit they were after, but a few dozen other bad men who'd been terrorizing the countryside as well. In the meantime, they saved a dozen women who fell madly in love with Steve, five men who said Johnny was the bravest sheriff they ever saw, and seven children who wished Emmy could be their mama. McDuff nipped Paul squarely on the nose.

The group stopped at a nearby stream to water the horses and the pup. Once there, they realized how hungry they were. While the breeze blew through the trees and the bluebirds serenaded, Johnny laid out the picnic lunch Fiona had packed for them. "Fried chicken, potato salad, succotash, homemade pickles, deviled eggs, ginger crumb cake, and green tomato pie," Johnny announced proudly. McDuff licked his chops.

"I must've died and gone to heaven," Steve said. "All we get at home are things like liver and onions and Salisbury steak. If we're lucky, we might have moldy bread pudding for dessert."

They all devoured the food, relishing every bite, then lay out on their blankets like stuffed sausage links.

"Are you havin' fun yet?" Johnny asked Steve.

"You kidding?" Steve answered, a huge grin plastered on his face. "This is one of the best days ever. I feel like my life has just begun." Johnny even thought he looked a little better. The fresh air was working its wonders.

They all chatted for a while, laughed some more, and ate some more. Then they felt guilty for gorging on food while so many still struggled to put any on their tables. Between the Great Depression and the widespread droughts out West, times were hard. Johnny prayed for an end to it all. Emmy and Steve added an *amen* to his prayer, while Paul grabbed another pickle.

"Enough of this lollygagging," Steve said. "We have a road awaitin' us." He paused for emphasis, then added, "I'm sorry to tell you this, Sheriff, but I'm not who you think I am. I'm actually"—Steve's right eyebrow arched menacingly while he flashed a sinister scowl—"Bad Bart. This fella here with the ridiculous moustache"—he gestured to Paul—"is the notorious Windy Bill. We've been helpin' you corral all those outlaws as a means to clear a path for us to take over this here territory! Bwahahaha! You've fallen for my dastardly plan!"

Emmy chuckled. "Paul is Windy Bill?"

"Yup. Especially after liver and onions."

Clouds began spilling into the horizon. It wouldn't be long before the chill weather turned much colder. They packed up the last remnants of food—what little there was—and Johnny and Paul lifted Steve into the buggy.

"Sheriff Sherlock," Steve chided, "you're a cow-eyed mule, and your dog eats rutabagas." McDuff whined.

Johnny cocked his hat to one side. "Well, I'll see you behind bars for them words, Bad Bart. And you can take that to the bank!"

"Oh, I'll see you at the bank, you odious law grubber. I plan to make a very large withdrawal!"

Johnny hopped down, pleased at Steve's enthusiasm. He and Emmy picked up the last bits of rubbish strewn about

while the two brothers whispered conspiracies. When he saw the opportune moment, Paul called out, “Last one home’s a deviled egg!” He snapped the reins and off they bolted, leaving Johnny and Emmy behind, frowning.

“Sheriff,” Emmy said in her broken Italian dialect, “Bad Bart and Windy Bill are a gettin’ away!”

“Don’t worry your pretty head, Miss Emmy.” Johnny straightened his hat. “I’ll catch them ruffians afore they manage any more mischief.”

They mounted their horses, and Johnny reached for his cap gun before “Hi-o-ing” Aluminum, but . . . it wasn’t in his holster.

The road turned uneven and rutted, so Paul tugged on the reins to slow the buggy down.

“What’re you doing, bonehead?” Steve asked. “They’ll catch us in no time at this pace.”

“It’s too bumpy,” Paul said.

“Don’t be a wimp. This is a race for honor, glory, and fun! Go faster!”

“Mom told me I had to drive slow.”

“She tells you to eat your parsnips too, but I know you shove them in your pockets when she’s not looking.”

Steve could see that Paul had no intention of giving in, so he lifted up Johnny’s cap gun.

Paul did a double take. “Where’d you get that?”

Steve’s eyebrows danced a jig. “I grabbed it out of Johnny’s holster when he helped me into the buggy. I expect by now he realizes that he was pilfered of it by the cleverest, pickpocketing hombre this side of Raleigh.” Steve pointed the gun straight ahead. “This’ll get that lazy horse a runnin’.” He squinted his eyes in anticipation . . . and pulled the trigger.

Steve was right. It did get the horse running. In fact, the horse broke into a frenzied gallop.

Johnny and Emmy had almost caught up to Paul and Steve when they heard Johnny's cap gun pop. They saw the horse bolt.

Emmy gasped. "The horse spooked! Johnny!"

Johnny dug his heels into his horse's sides and charged into full pursuit. The road was straight but anything but flat, with ruts and potholes strewn like land mines across the road. He pushed his horse for all he could but gained little ground on the buggy. Then Johnny saw something that made his heart stop.

The buggy hit a deep rut, and Paul was flung off the carriage and into the ditch.

Johnny knew Steve didn't have the strength to take the reins and regain control. It was only a matter of seconds before . . .

Johnny shouted, "Emmy! Help Paul!" Then, with every ounce of skill he had, he willed his horse to go even faster.

It didn't matter. A bend in the road caught Steve's horse by surprise, and it darted to the left too quickly. The buggy tipped, and then toppled. Johnny could do nothing but watch as it rolled, first with Steve in the seat, and then, suddenly, without him. The wooden buggy shattered into glass-like shards, some pieces flying backward, straight into Johnny's path. He had to swerve to avoid them.

The buggy seemed to roll forever. Johnny pulled his horse to a stop, waiting for the dust to settle, all the while scanning the area for Steve. His heart beat so hard that he thought it would burst through his chest. His breathing was erratic and curiously muffled, as if underwater.

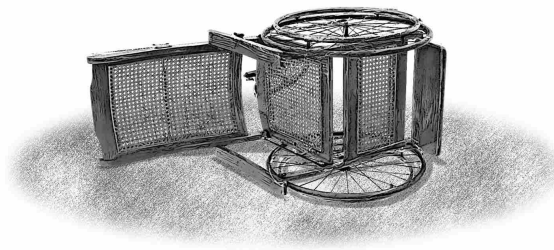
Time stood still.

Johnny saw the horse, unharmed, running back in the direction of the stable. It would be fine. It had been trained to return there if it was ever separated from its rider.

Tracing back, Johnny saw Steve, not twenty feet away, lying broken like a limp rag doll. Blood oozed from his legs, chest, arms—everywhere.

Johnny jumped down and ran to Steve's side. Steve's eyes were closed, and Johnny feared they would never open again.

Chapter Twenty-Three



Paul was, surprisingly, mostly unharmed. He'd landed in a bush and only suffered a few scrapes and bruises.

Steve was not so fortunate. His injuries were severe. Thankfully, he was still breathing, albeit shallowly, and faintly groaning in pain.

"Paul!" Johnny yelled. "Go get help! Your dad, my dad, anybody!"

Terror was in Paul's eyes, magnified by pools of tears. He didn't move. He repeated over and over, "It's my fault. It's all my fault!"

"It's no one's fault," Emmy said, now kneeling beside Johnny. "But he needs help, Paul. Please! Go. Now! We're not far from town, but you need to run. Hurry!"

Paul backed up. "This is the worst day. The worst day ever!" He turned and robotically started walking, then stumbled. At last he got his legs underneath him and ran, trotting at first and then taking off as fast as he could toward town.

Steve's eyes—dark and void—opened slightly. In them, there seemed to be a plea for help. Or perhaps it was good-bye. Johnny teared up, then rallied. "Emmy, get something to

cover him with—anything! He's in shock. We have to keep him warm."

Emmy ran to the wreckage of the buggy. She saw the cloak she had loaned Steve tangled up inside. She grabbed it, pulled it out, and brought it to Steve. She gently placed it over him, then lay down beside him in an effort to share some of her body heat.

In her absence, Johnny had canvassed Steve's injuries. "There's a large cut in his stomach," he told Emmy. "His arm is shattered, and his legs are . . . there's so much blood." Terror etched across his face. "It's bad, Emmy. Very bad. What'll we do if . . ." Johnny couldn't bring himself to say the words.

"Don't!" Emmy said. "Help is on the way. Until then, we need to do whatever it takes to keep him alive."

"I don't know what else we can do." Johnny felt like a shell with nothing inside—like he did when Fiona had her accident. He closed his eyes and promised God that he'd never ride another horse again if Steve could just get better. He made all sorts of promises.

McDuff ran up, whined, licked Steve's hand, and then barked. It brought Johnny out of his dazed state. Shaking off the cobwebs, he applied pressure on the worst of Steve's wounds to keep him from bleeding out. Emmy helped, all the while softly singing a tune:

Sei bella negli occhi,
Sei bella nel core,
Sei tutt'un amore,
Sei nata per me.
Ah! no, no, non pianger,
Coraggio, ben mio,
Quest'ultimo addio
Ricevi da me.

Ti vedo sì veglio,
Sì dormo ti vedo,
E viver non credo
Diviso da te.

Ah! no, no, ecc.

Johnny could see that Emmy was trying hard to hold back tears, but they would not be conquered. He watched her force herself to look at Steve, and Johnny could see the horror on her face. He felt the same way. Steve's complexion had faded into an ashen-white; his lips were blue. They heard faint breathing, but only sporadically. Steve lay awkwardly, completely broken.

Steve was dying.

Johnny prayed, harder than he had ever prayed before. He recalled verses from the Bible about Jesus healing people. He spoke them aloud as if the memory of them would make them happen again. He bellowed, "Father in heaven, You created Steve. You made him a new creation. Make his body new again too. *Please* God. I know You *can* do it. I pray You *will* do it."

But . . . nothing.

Emmy whispered to Johnny that Steve's wounds were now bleeding less, likely because his heart was only beating every few seconds. "Please, God. Please, get help here soon. Please help Steve. *Please*, God," she prayed aloud.

Johnny lay down on the other side of Steve, opposite Emmy. The two faced each other, looking into the other's tear-filled eyes. Johnny found himself singing a hymn that Fiona—and his mother, Janneth—loved:

Blessed assurance, Jesus is mine
Oh, what a foretaste of glory divine
Heir of salvation, purchase of God
Born of His Spirit, washed in His blood.
This is my story, this is my song
Praising my Savior all the day long
This is my story, this is my song
Praising my Savior all the day long.

Unexpectedly, Steve coughed, faintly at first and then violently. His body shook with each raspy bark. Johnny feared this was the end. Surely, Steve could hold on no longer.

But then . . .

Instead of breathing his last, Steve's eyes *opened*, searching for something to fix on. His face suddenly no longer looked ashen, but pink—no, more than pink. How to describe it . . . vibrant? Yes, in fact more vibrant than Johnny ever remembered seeing it before!

Steve's head turned, and, looking Johnny squarely in the face, he asked, "Whittaker, why are you lying next to me?" Then he looked over at Emmy and said with a smirk, "You can stay right where you are, Emmy."

Instead, she bolted straight up. McDuff sat up as well.

Johnny got up too, shock disorienting him completely. Was he imagining all this?

Johnny bent down and lifted Steve's shirt. The gash in his stomach was gone. He inspected Steve's arms, his legs, and the deep laceration on his head. The fractures appeared to be knitted, and the wounds had all closed.

Steve sat up.

Emmy gasped and cupped her hand over her mouth. "You —*you sat up*! *By yourself*! I've never seen you do that before. I —I didn't think you could!"

"What are you doing, Whittaker?" Steve asked as Johnny looked him over. "I mean, come on, there's a lady present."

"You had an accident," Emmy said. "A bad one!"

"We thought you were . . . well . . ." Johnny gathered himself and then asked, "How do you feel?"

Steve's forehead furrowed in thought. "I feel great. *Really* great. I had an accident, you say? Really?"

"Well, look around you. A few minutes ago, you were in the same condition as that buggy. Maybe worse."

"But then, how could I . . . ?" Steve looked down at his hands. He flexed them. They looked strong. His eyes fixed on his legs.

They *moved*.

Steve's eyes grew wide, and he looked up to the heavens, as if praying that this wasn't a dream. Lips pursed, he put his right hand on the ground and flipped over. Then the most miraculous thing of all happened.

Steve stood up.

He looked first at Johnny, then at Emmy. His face blossomed into an overwhelming mix of joy and utter astonishment. “I’ve never in my life stood up. Not even as a toddler. Never. But here I am! I’m standing up! *I’m standing up*!”

Tears of joy streamed down all three faces, and they wept and gasped and sobbed and laughed. McDuff barked happily. All three came together into one big embrace, and Steve said, “Thank You, God! Thank You, thank You, *thank* You, Lord!”

Steve had been healed, not merely of his injuries, which were substantial, but of his muscular dystrophy as well. Completely, perfectly, utterly healed.

Suddenly, Steve did everything he never could before. He leapt, he twirled and danced about with his hands raised into the air as a sign of freedom and of worship. “What did I tell you earlier, huh? This *is* the best day. *Ever*!” McDuff bounced right along with him, barking nonstop.

Something seemed to occur to Steve at that moment, and he stopped and asked, “Where’s Paul? Tell me he’s all right too!”

“He’s fine,” Emmy said. “He went for help.”

A beaming smile returned to Steve’s face. “We have to stop him before he kills himself looking for my dad.” He looked about. “Which way?”

Emmy pointed toward the direction Paul took, and Steve lit out, running like a track star. Looking back, he called out, “Stop standing there like two statues. You want the pigeons to do their business on you? Come on!” And off he went, McDuff racing along beside him.

Emmy shook her head incredulously. “It’s a miracle.”

“Yeah,” Johnny muttered. But his attention was on the cloak Emmy had draped over Steve. It was covered in blood, of course, all except for one large section that looked to have been patched on at the bottom. That bit was completely spotless.

“Emmy, where did you get this cloak?”

Emmy seemed surprised by the question. “You’ve seen it

before. It was my Uncle Alfonso's. Lazlo used it for his costume in the school's production of *A Christmas Carol* last Christmas. He was the Ghost of Christmas Future, remember?"

Johnny knew he'd seen it before. But nothing added up. His thoughts were trudging through a muddy bog that confused everything he'd come to believe.

Emmy grabbed his arm. "We'd better go help Steve find Paul."

Johnny nodded, and they ran as quickly as their limbs would take them. Steve's legs, though, had been healed so thoroughly that it was a mighty chore to catch up with him.

They finally did reach him on one of the cart paths just outside town. But Steve was not alone. They'd arrived just in time to observe Karl Mangle standing—mouth agape—in front of his completely healthy son. Paul poked Steve as if to see if he was real or a ghost.

Karl didn't need that proof. He fell to his knees weeping and embraced Steve, burying his head in the boy's chest. He sobbed for so long that Steve laughed and said, "You wanna go show Mom now?"

Karl smiled and, rising, said, "Yes. Yes, I most certainly do."

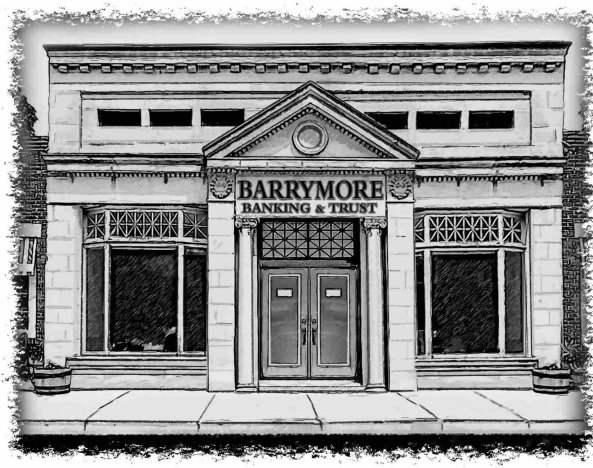
Johnny marveled at the beautiful scene and whispered a prayer of thanks to the God who heals. Then he looked down again at the cloak in his hands. "Emmy, this patch at the bottom . . . it looks different from the rest of the cloak."

Emmy nodded. "Yes, the costume was too short for Lazlo, so they had to add a piece to the bottom to make it long enough." She looked at it, and her brow furrowed. "It's the only piece that's clean. No blood. Why?"

Johnny didn't answer. *This cloak . . . that patch . . . had to be from his cloth, the robe of Jesus. But how?*

As Steve said, this was the best day ever, one filled with wonder, joy, and a fair share of confusion. No one noticed, though, that as Karl Mangle and his two sons started their walk home, Karl's neck was craned around like an owl, and his jackal eyes were laser-focused on young John Avery Whittaker.

Epilogue



Johnny and Emmy walked home, Johnny deep in thought and Emmy jabbering a mile a minute. “I’ve never seen anything like that!” she said, shifting the cloak from one shoulder to the other. “He was healed! Completely healed! He went from so weak he could barely sit up to running faster than you and me! I mean, this is a miracle, Johnny! A true miracle!”

Johnny nodded and eyed the cloak. Obviously, the clean patch sewn into it was from the robe of Christ. There could be no other explanation. But how in the world had it gotten there? And even more alarming was the possibility that there might be even more pieces floating around somewhere out there!

Suddenly, Emmy gasped and stopped dead in her tracks.

“You okay?” Johnny asked.

She pointed up the street. Johnny looked.

They were near Ben Huck’s house. Out front were two regular cars and Deputy Miller’s patrol car. Thoughts of the cloth were momentarily forgotten as Johnny and Emmy raced to Ben’s door to investigate. They got there just as the door opened and out stepped Al, the detective! “Hi, kids,” he said curtly. “Stay back now.”

He turned back to the door, and out filed—in rapid succession—Mr. Underwood from Barrymore Banking and Trust, two other men Johnny and Emmy had never seen before, and lastly, Ben Huck, handcuffed, being maneuvered by Deputy Miller!

"What's going on?" Johnny demanded.

"I'll tell you what's going on," Mr. Underwood replied, his voice dripping with contempt. "Your friend here is a bank robber!"

Both Johnny and Emmy exploded. *"What?"* They both started talking at once, each appealing to different authorities —Emmy to Al and Johnny to Deputy Miller—as they marched Ben to the police car. Ben said nothing; he just kept walking.

Al managed to calm them. "I'm sorry, kids, but it's true. The evidence is overwhelming."

"But it can't be!" Johnny exclaimed. "You've got the wrong man! If anyone's guilty, it's *me*! You were there, Al, in Hoops Diner when I blabbed about how shutting off the main power box would kill the alarm. Arrie must've heard me, and she told the robbers! *I'm* the guilty one! Ben is innocent! Tell them, Ben!"

They were at the car now. Ben turned back to Johnny, his face a study in sadness and shame. "No, boy," he said softly but firmly. "It warn't you. It was me. I helped the robbers. I've already confessed. I'm guilty—guilty as sin."

Emmy started crying. Johnny was in a daze—numb and speechless.

Deputy Miller tucked Ben into the patrol car, closed the door, circled around to the driver's side, got in, and started the engine. Al, Mr. Underwood, and the other men got into their cars as well, and the caravan took off, leaving Johnny and Emmy in the dust.

All was quiet, save for the chirping birds, Emmy's soft sobs, and Johnny's labored breathing and pounding heart.

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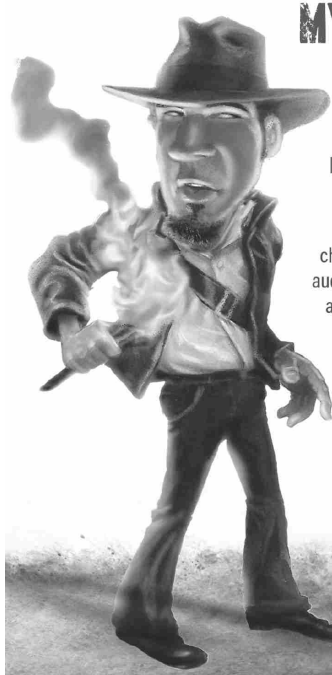

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